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Making the future : women students in the new further education.

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Centre for Educational Studies

King's College London

**MAKING THE FUTURE:
WOMEN STUDENTS IN THE NEW FURTHER EDUCATION**

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1999

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the experiences of women returning to further education as mature students, during a period of rapid change in the sector. Primary evidence is used to provide illustrations of the ways in which government policies have consequences for the lives of women students.

The first section gives a context for the empirical research by focusing on historical and contemporary themes in the education of women and recent developments in further education which shape the learning opportunities available to adult learners. Changes in education policy are identified and the mechanisms which have been used to develop quasi-markets in further education are described. Finally, the section discusses theoretical and ethical issues relating to the research and describes practice in the field.

The second section makes visible the experiences of a small cohort of women who have returned to education. The ways in which different women place themselves and are placed, in relation to their childhood and adult families, is discussed in respect of the choices they make about their education and the feelings they have about themselves as learners. The study goes on to consider the social structures which influence the time women have available to study and their ability to effect life-change.

The final section considers the way in which education policy is being interpreted through practice at sector level and how this affects opportunities for women returners. The tension created by differences in student and government requirements of colleges is revealed. The last chapter summarises the study, offers some conclusions about women's position in the Learning Society and identifies key issues for policy development.

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INTRODUCTION

'The Learning Age will be built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society. Learning helps shape the values that we pass on to each succeeding generation. Learning supports active citizenship and democracy.'

David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in the foreword to The Learning Age, (DfEE, 1998:8)

The Life-long Learning Agenda

The Further Education (FE) sector has been a site of radical transformation during the past six years; the changes being driven by government policy initiatives. As a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, adults have, for the first time, a statutory right to publicly funded education. Government policy statements set out by the Conservatives in Lifetime Learning (DfEE, 1995) and by New Labour in The Learning Age (DfEE, 1998) have had a high public profile. There has been a broad consensus between both Conservative and Labour Governments about what the priorities for post compulsory education should be (Whitty, 1998). Policy has focused on three key priorities: firstly, a need to develop industrial training to increase Britain's skill base in order to develop the nation's economic competitive strength; secondly, a need to widen participation in education by people who have few, or no, formal qualifications, in order to get them into employment and not dependent on welfare payments; and thirdly, the need to find strategies which encourage social inclusion and reduce crime. Colleges have been under continuous pressure from government to respond to these priorities and at the same time to set high academic standards and raise levels of student retention and achievement.

The Labour Government described its own role as creating,

'a framework of opportunities for people to learn and to lift barriers that prevent them from taking up those opportunities' (DfEE, 1998:13).

Why this study?

As a senior manager in an FE college, charged with implementing government education policy, I became concerned that the apparently neutral policy was not meeting the needs of many of my students. This study developed out of my concern and my professional need to

understand policies and influence practice. My intention was to examine critically the social consequences of government policies and reveal the rationales which underpinned them. There appeared to me to be a gap between the provision that governments were prepared to fund and what students were seeking; yet, policy documents described the role of education in creating an inclusive society in which learning in its widest sense played a central part:

‘Lifetime learning is not just about the economy and competitiveness. It is also crucial to our national culture and quality of life. For older people in particular, participation in education and training represents a major way in which they can contribute to the life of the community’ (DfEE, 1995: Foreword by Conservative Secretaries of State)

‘Our vision of the Learning Age is about more than employment. The development of a culture of learning will help build a united society, assist in the creation of personal independence and encourage our creativity and innovation’ (New Labour - DfEE, 1998: 10)

It seemed to me that despite the rhetoric of ‘choice’ and a stated belief in the value of the wider social value of education, it was the needs of industry and short term vocational goals that were at the centre of policy developments and which would receive funding. The routes by which I believed a ‘learning society’ might be realised, were become increasingly difficult to maintain, because of the impact of government policy laid out in the 1992 FHE Act.

My substantial experience of working with adults, in a range of learning situations, led me to the opinion that there is a lack of understanding about the ways in which policy impacts on individuals. There is an absence of students’ own perspectives on the learning opportunities afforded by recent developments. I wanted to privilege the views and experiences of students rather than politicians, education professionals, or employers. This new data could then be used to inform strategic planning within my own college.

A pilot study which I undertook, suggested that many of the students who were having the greatest difficulties coping with returning to learning, were women with children. As a feminist, who is also a student and a working mother, it is important to me that women’s experiences are made visible and their contribution acknowledged. I have therefore chosen to focus my research on the experiences of mature women students in Further Education. The in-depth interviews with women returners which inform the study, give ‘voice’ to a large but frequently ‘unheard’ community and reveal the ways in which government policy and social structures affect student choice and achievement. The women’s stories illuminate the role of education in their lives and expose contradictions inherent in contemporary FE policy. The study examines the ways in which responses to early experiences of learning, continue to affect

the way women feel about their abilities to learn and achieve as mature students and consequently the choices they make. These women's stories also demonstrate their commitment to use education to make a new future for themselves, their families and their communities.

Overview of the study

Women have traditionally used local learning opportunities provided by the voluntary sector, local authority adult education services and further education. A key factor influencing their involvement has always been whether learning could be fitted around their domestic and work commitments. For women with children, this has been especially important. Education has provided some women not only with skills and knowledge, but with personal space. Women students in adult education have been drawn from: the working and middle classes, from diverse cultures; they have been of different ages, able-bodied and with mental health problems and physical disabilities. However, the types of courses women have generally chosen and the ease with which they have been able to access provision, has been determined by their different histories and positioning in relation to economic and social capitals.

The research field for this study was an inner city FE college in an area which combines affluence and deprivation and attracts an ethnically diverse student body. My research focused on the experiences of a group of women who, at the time of the fieldwork, were on substantial part time, accredited, programmes. However, the educational pathways these women had travelled to arrive at this point are important and lend understanding to what women want from education, the factors which influence the choices they make and their different abilities to cope with returning to college. So whilst this study is about FE now, it also by necessity touches on current and past practice in the wider sphere of learning opportunities for adults. The significant changes in the ways that post compulsory education has been funded and structured in the last few years, combined with the timescales over which the women have spread their return to education, give rise to complexity in the use of terminology such as 'adult education' (see appendix IV).

During my research I made an analytic separation between those courses which predominantly attract 'specific focus' students and those which tend to attract 'life-changers'. This study does

not concern the 'specific focus' student who is typically studying on a two hour per week course (often in the evening) in order to update an existing skill, or learn a new one such as word processing or another language. My interest is with those women who have turned to FE in order to make a significant change in their lives, in the context of educational policy apparently centred on widening participation and meeting customer demand.

A number of studies have been concerned with the experiences of mature women students, notably Morrison (1992) and Edwards (1993). These studies are predominantly about women returning to higher education and although the research findings generally support my own data, as I shall reveal, a number of differences between their work and my own may be the result of differences in culture and status between the higher and further education sectors. Other published work about FE tends to focus on helping managers to run their 'education business' more efficiently and effectively in order to survive in the 'market' (1) and fails to look at the impact policy has at the level of the individual student. Students are often only considered in terms of the problems they pose for the institution. My project here is to explore the contradictions within FE education policy, which pose problems for both educators and students.

Analyses based on the accounts of a small number of women are necessarily tentative. Their life experiences and social position makes each of their accounts personal. They make choices within multi-layered contexts which include college, friends, family and wider society. This study concerns policy analysis. Consequently, I believe that it is important to draw out continuities in women's experiences in order to reveal the ways in which educational opportunities continue to advantage men. I would also wish to acknowledge 'difference' between women's experiences and their unequal access to material resources, privilege and power, which arises from their 'race', ethnicity, religious beliefs, class, age, sexuality and able-bodiedness, in order to reveal how apparently neutral policies impact on different constituencies in different ways and therefore may work against inclusiveness.

This study therefore sets out to examine the way in which government education policy has been interpreted in practice and seeks to reveal whose values are validated in policy and whose are not. It suggests a misfit between the image of an ideal society projected through policy and the lived reality. Ball has argued that:

‘Policy making in a modern, complex, plural society like Britain is unwieldy and complex’
(Ball, 1990:3).

Thus, contemporary policies may be fractured and shifting and the result of the accommodation of different but dominant interests and values. Throughout this study it is clear that the meaning and purpose of education is contested at the level of government, FE sector, local authorities, college and community. I will argue that the introduction of education markets and the failure of governments to harmonise education and social policies have led to potentially discriminatory practices. I will suggest that the inability to recognise the contradictions within policy and the unwillingness to challenge social structures which sustain inequalities, may well result in government failing in its own project of creating a learning society and making individuals less dependent on the state.

The descriptions and analyses in this study arise out of my direct involvement in implementing government policy in an FE college and working with staff and students in a time of rapid change. It is a unique document which details and analyses a key moment in the history of FE. It was my intention that this critical appraisal of education policy should be used not only to advance my own understanding, but to inform decision making in order to bring about change.

NOTES

1. Examples of these types of publication can be found in the Mendip Papers first developed by the FE Staff College and now available from FEDA.

CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

'These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity. To express even what is expressed here has been a work of labour and difficulty. The writing has been done in kitchens, at odds and ends of leisure, in the midst of distractions and obstacles' (1)

Virginia Woolf (1931:67)

Introduction

Knowledge of the past provides us with a context for understanding our current experiences. It offers us the possibility of identifying concepts and processes which affect the opportunities available to us and the choices we make. Women's experience of education is inextricably linked with British social, political and economic history; therefore in this chapter I will seek to link the evolving position of women in society, with their access to educational opportunities. However, it is not my intention here to write a history of Adult Education nor a history of women's education. My project in this first chapter is to identify some key ideas, which have shaped and continue to influence the education available to girls and women in Britain at the present time. In order to do this, I will highlight some key developments concerning women's involvement in education. By privileging sex, I am arguing that the collective experience of women is different from that of men and that this is worthy of study. The broad brush strokes in this overview necessarily make it difficult to fully address the complex intersections of other social categories such as class, 'race' and sexuality.

The main argument of this chapter is that that women are positioned within contradictory discourses concerning their relationship to domesticity and the 'public' world and that despite political, social, economic and technological change, whatever their position in society, women have consistently had fewer opportunities to benefit from education than male members of their families. Accessing the 'traditional' male curriculum, higher education and training has been a struggle. Whilst every woman's personal history and circumstance is different, many women have at an individual level, resisted oppressive definitions. Women have also sought to bring

about change in educational and social policies in order to support other women's struggle to gain status and empower themselves.

I shall discuss shifting definitions of vocational and non-vocational educational and training in relation to the roles women have been ascribed by society. I shall argue that the dominant agenda of state educational provision for women has been to confirm their domestic role and train them to be wives and mothers and that when they have been required to participate in the labour force, their contribution has tended to be an extension of their domestic skills, predominantly within the traditional contexts of 'caring'. I will argue that within the debate concerning the extent to which the adult learning experiences which have been made available to women can be called education, vocational training or 'leisure', can be found an important and persistent paradox - for whilst women have consistently been found 'lacking' in the quality of their domestic skills, and their initial education frequently focused on the acquisition of these skills, the fact that their domestic role is presented as 'natural' has meant that adult courses in traditional women's subjects have often been identified as 'leisure' and as such not eligible for public funding. (This is exemplified in the division, for funding purposes, of schedule 2 and non schedule 2 courses, within the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act). This first chapter identifies key themes which are played out in the study which follows.

My use of discourse as an analytical tool

In this study I will be referring to a particular interpretation of discourse which is borrowed from the work of Michel Foucault (1974 and 1977). This thesis is not of itself a Foucauldian analysis. Foucault helps us understand how cultural and social practices become institutionalised. I have drawn on his work to help explain the way in which some beliefs and practices have been sustained. For example, labour market theory suggests that women's position, in relation to education and employment, might be explained by economic shifts. Whilst there is a relationship between the economy and women's employment, one dimensional explanations tend to be deterministic and fail to allow a more nuanced interpretation of women's participation in education and employment.

Foucault has suggested that educational knowledges and practices are part of the normalisation of social principles within our society. His ideas have interested educational researchers who

have explored how his work might relate to modern institutions. (Ball, 1990b; Preece, 1998). Notably, in the field of education policy making in the school sector, Ball (1990b) has developed Foucault's ideas and discussed some of the ways in which education inter-relates with politics, economics and history in the 'formation and constitution of human beings as subjects'. Additionally, institutions in society are themselves subjected to discursive regimes, such as a church which has a powerful hierarchy who control and filter knowledge. A further extension of these ideas suggests that colleges which are themselves subject to discourses, are also important sites involved in the development of discourses and permit differential access to various forms of discourse. In this way, inequalities may be sustained, yet appear to be the result of 'normal' processes.

Foucault (1977) has explored the links between power and knowledge and argues that:

'Knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse [...] there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice, and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms' (Foucault, 1977:182-3)

Foucault believes that discourses are all-pervading systems involving thought and language which embody strategies for sustaining cultural values and versions of 'truth'. Discourses are not only what is said or thought, but are about who may speak in what situation and with what authority. Ideas written and uttered will change their meaning depending on their origin, the status of those who create them and the position of those who receive them. Thus, Ball (1990) has usefully discussed the way in which there is room for conflicting discourses to develop within a common language and within the meaning of terms such as 'choice'. In the context of this study it is important to understand that notions of 'opportunity' and 'choice' may have very different meanings, depending on who is applying the term and what their frame of reference is.

Foucault has suggested that discourses are influenced by events in time which often result in a reconstructed logic which rationalises the new state of being and justifies why things are done in a particular way. I shall argue that an examination of women's involvement in education, suggests that whilst some discourses concerning women's role and the type of educational provision thought appropriate to fit them for this may change over time, such discourses have consistently supported the maintenance of dominant 'patriarchal' (2) interests within society. I shall also suggest that the partial and shifting nature of discourses, results in meanings which may be contested and contradictory and that whilst some discursive formations may have been

appropriated to support patriarchal interests, they may also have contained the possibility of supporting resistance and the growth of an alternative feminist epistemology (Harding, 1991; Stanley and Wise, 1993). The extent to which an individual's own beliefs and attitudes are recognised by themselves or others, and their ability to resist oppressive definitions of themselves, depends on how far they relate to dominant power structures (Preece, 1998; drawing on the work of Foucault, 1972 and Weedon, 1987). In this way educational opportunities available to women can either function as,

‘an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which [...] women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world’ (Thompson, 1979:26).

The importance of making women's experiences visible

Virginia Woolf writing about women in history commented,

‘One is held up by scarcity of facts. One knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her’ (Woolf, 1949:67)

In recent years feminist writers including Rowbotham (1973), David (1980), Spender (1982) and Purvis (1991) have drawn attention to the ‘invisibility’ of women in histories of education which have taken men and boys as the main reference point. Stanley and Wise (1993:27) have argued that where women's presence is not ignored, ‘it is viewed and presented in distorted and sexist ways’. The history of Adult Education is long and complex (Peers, 1958; Harrison, 1961; Kelly, 1992; Fieldhouse, 1996), yet it is men's involvement which is celebrated. Only recently has women's contribution to, and experience of, its development been discussed, notably by Thompson (1983); Purvis (1980 and 1989); Coats (1994) and Benn (1996). These differing and evolving feminist reconstructions of the past have revealed women's experiences, challenged some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of earlier writers and made possible a cumulative process of transformation. However, there are other ‘absences’ in historical accounts, particularly concerning ‘race’. The involvement in education of minority ethnic women as adult learners is likely to be subsumed within the more general experience of ‘women’ or be presented within a discussion of the development of adult basic education (ABE) or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Whilst social class has been central to discussion of the development of education for both men and women, only now are more

complex differences and interrelationships between class, gender and 'race' being considered (Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998). This study, which explores the experiences of a small group of ordinary women in post-incorporation FE, adds to the evidence of women's continuing struggle to have access to educational opportunities which recognise their skills and aspirations and take account of the material circumstances in which they live their lives.

In the two sections which follow I will first describe briefly the education provided for girls and women in the nineteenth century and the early emancipatory struggles by women. This will enable me to reveal continuities and differences with later policy and provision. In the second section I will consider key, post second world war developments and discuss the impact of second wave feminism on the educational opportunities available to women who wished to return to education as mature students.

Although this study concentrates on educational opportunities for mature women in further education, I shall refer briefly to schools and higher education where this adds a context to my argument. Whilst acknowledging the significant contribution of the voluntary sector to adult education, the focus of my work is the publicly funded education thought suitable for women by the English state.

GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Victorian discourses of domesticity and the separation of home and work

I shall now describe how a 'domestic discourse' in girls' education became established within the middle-class culture of the 19th century and identify key discourses concerning the educational provision thought suitable for women which have been sedimented down to limit life choices and opportunities for women today.

In the nineteenth century the rise of capitalism and urban growth significantly affected social divisions and the family. Hall (1979) and Purvis (1989 and 1991) have described the ways in which during the nineteenth century an influential middle class domestic discourse became

established which separated the worlds of men and women and shaped the form and content of the education thought appropriate for girls and women. The dominant discourse which presented women as 'naturally' fitted to the domestic sphere limited the opportunities for both working and middle class women. Working class females were provided with a curriculum of domestically useful knowledge which could be used in their own homes to make them better wives and mothers, or in the houses of their 'betters' as domestic servants. Middle class girls were similarly offered a curriculum which would suit them to their role as 'lady of the house' and help them develop accomplishments which would make them attractive to suitors.

Purvis (1991) has usefully identified three major assumptions, evident in contemporary Victorian writing, which supported these domestic discourses. The first key assumption was that the biological differences between men and women supported a 'natural' division of their roles and the spheres in which they operated. Thus women were 'naturally' suited to bearing children and caring for the family within the home and men were 'naturally' suited to operating within the public sphere. The second assumption was that since women were primarily wives and mothers, they were essentially 'relative' rather than 'autonomous' beings. Women were thus presented as inferior to men and were defined in relation to their role as wife, mother or daughter, their own identity being subsumed. Linked with this was a third assumption, supported by pseudo-scientific theories which placed women as biologically inferior to men and therefore not capable of developing their intellectual skills. In addition to these 'scientific', deterministic theories, the church offered evidence of divine order based on Genesis which confirmed women in an inferior position in relation to men. Women were defined as weak and required the protection of a man: men were strong, capable of intellectual thought and the 'natural' protectors of women. The gender stereotype became that of the woman who placed the needs of others above her own and carried out her duties within the domestic haven of the home, far from the competitive world of work in the polluted and corrupt city.

Social Darwinistic ideas

Dyhouse (1976) has discussed the way in which in the late Victorian period, discourses concerning women's education shifted from domesticity based on their traditional roles and 'natural' inclinations to become attached to 'Social Darwinistic' ideas concerning national efficiency and social progress. Drawing on contemporary nineteenth century sources she has

argued that interest in science and theories relating to 'the survival of the fittest' contributed to the association of women's role with the genetic and physical well being of the nation. Women's responsibilities were extended beyond their own families to the future of the race. It was argued that as a result of this responsibility, their education should focus on motherhood; although there were different definitions as to what the most appropriate curriculum might be. There were arguments for an intellectual curriculum which would result in educated women able to run a well ordered home and support their children's education. There were counter suggestions that this type of education might actually damage women's ability to reproduce and nurture their children, or that it would result in them being less inclined to devote their lives to motherhood. Maternal neglect and the moral and physical deterioration of the nation were linked. In the late nineteenth century middle-class women established educational programmes to instruct working-class women in maternal and domestic skills and Adult Education began to develop a 'women's interest' curriculum centred on the acquisition of practical and cultural skills and knowledge related to the home (Hughes, 1992; Westwood, 1988; Coats, 1994).

The role of women in relation to the health and success of their families has been and remains a recurrent theme and education provided for working class women in particular has consistently focused on their domestic skills and responsibility for moral education of their children: from the 'rookeries' of Booth's London where the 'poor and criminal classes' lived and public concern about the sickly and poorly nourished men recruited to fight the Boer war (3) to juvenile delinquency and adult deviance in the 1950s (Bowlby 1951 and 1965) and the academic failure of children in the 1990s, (Oakley and Mayall, 1996). What emerges is a discourse which evolves and changes in relation to current ideas and concerns, yet persists in blaming women, especially those who work outside the home, for poor mothering.

Educating the good woman and the lady of the house

In the nineteenth century the way that domesticity and 'femininity' was constructed in relationship to middle class and working class girls and women was differentiated. Because these discourses were class specific this accommodated the employment of working class women whilst it was considered inappropriate for middle class women (except in certain circumstances such as to become a governess or ladies companion.) As a result, educational provision was not only stratified by class but by gender and the content and form of education

available to either middle class or working class girls was very different from that available to their brothers (David, 1980).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, girls' schools were not common and none was provided by the state. The education that was available for Victorian working-class girls has been well documented by David (1980), Dyhouse (1981 and 1987) and Purvis (1991). It was basic and generally confined to 'The three R's', domestic skills such as cleaning, knitting and plain sewing taught in schools of industry which were set up alongside poor houses and moral instruction at Sunday School. Benn (1998) has argued that this early education provision centred on salvation and domestic vocation and was, 'frequently a process of normalisation and socialisation to male norms' (Benn, 1998:38).

As the century progressed, the state became increasingly involved in financing and controlling elementary education which included directing the age of compulsory school attendance and the content of the curriculum. Domestic subjects retained key importance in the education of girls (Dyhouse, 1981 and 1987).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, middle class girls might attend private schools or be educated at home by a governess. Their curriculum also generally focused on their future domestic role as 'the lady of the house'. They were groomed to attract a husband and gain the knowledge which would help them run a household rather than carry out domestic duties themselves - the 'scientific principles' of domestic management rather than laundry skills. However, the growing demand for female emancipation resulted in gradual change. The establishment of 'high' schools and in particular the North London Collegiate School (1850) and the pioneering girls public boarding school, Cheltenham Ladies College (1854), marked a shift to a more progressive and academic curriculum for middle-class girls, although 'ladylike behaviour' was still vigorously encouraged. Whilst the reformed schools did not offer a direct challenge to the status quo, Purvis (1991) has suggested that they were places where new ideas could be nurtured and questions asked about women's role in society.

By the end of the century, the educational opportunities for middle class girls and women expanded as a result of the Women's Suffrage Movement and the pioneering work of educational reformers such as Emily Davies (4). Rowbotham (1973) has argued that the campaign for educational reforms by the nineteenth century Women's Movement was more

concerned with giving women access to education and the advantages that this might bring them, rather than motivated by a wish to alter the social relationship between men and women. Delamont (1978) has discussed the dilemma faced by more radical campaigners who demanded education for women on equal terms with men, but did not wish to appear unfeminine

In 1874 the first women's college, Girton, was established in Cambridge University. By the turn of the century women were able to take examinations for degrees and could graduate at some universities such as London. However, women were not awarded degrees at Oxford until 1920 and at Cambridge, 1948. The University Extension Movement discussed by Purvis (1991) and Swindells (1995) and the campaigns by women to be given access to the same university education as men resulted in a small 'new educated female elite' (Purvis, 1991:119). A large number of these women became teachers and offered other women access to a broader curriculum, new ideas about women's role and female models of educational achievement. However very few became involved in non-traditional areas of women's employment such as industry or business (Sanderson, 1972).

Collective action was problematic for, as Purvis (1991) has pointed out, the class specific ideals of womanhood helped to maintain the status quo rather than encourage a common union between women. For working class women, the dominant discourse which encribed women as socially, economically and educationally dependent on men, made it difficult for women to mount an independent political struggle, evidenced by the difficulties they encountered in attempting to educate themselves either alongside or independently of men in relation to the Adult School Movement, The Mechanics' Institutes, the Working Men's Colleges and even the Guilds (Swindells, 1995). Swindells (1995) has highlighted the class and gender issues faced by working class women in relation to their struggle for adult learning opportunities, for women's self-determination through education and to access to educational resources on their own terms. Should they press for access to the dominant 'male' culture or attempt to generate a distinct radical curriculum? Privilege gender or class? A dilemma evident within feminist debates about education a century later (Coats, 1994).

The establishment of Adult Education for women in a context of emancipatory and class struggles

There were numerous significant initiatives in Adult Education during the nineteenth century which were to have an impact on the development of socialism and the trades union movement in particular (Harrison, 1961; Kelly, 1992). These included Literary and Philosophical Societies, Mutual Improvement Societies, Working Men's Colleges, Co-operative Society Education and the University Extension Movement. The main initiative was The Mechanics' Institute Movement, started in the 1820's with the intention of offering working-class men 'an easily accessible training in the scientific principles of their professions' (Harrop, 1987:96). Until recently women's presence in these movements has been hidden. Purvis (1991) documents the struggle by women to be included in Mechanics Institutes, yet once admitted their curriculum was different from that of men and was again generally limited to the '3 Rs', sewing and knitting, skills necessary for 'the upbringing of children and the general comfort of their menfolk' (Purvis, 1991:39). Neither were women given equality of membership, typically being denied the right to vote or hold office (Benn, 1998). Purvis (1991) notes that the entry of working-class women into institutions could be supported through the discourse of women's supportive role to men. Education would make women more useful to men as 'competent' and 'educated wives'. Thus they were viewed as 'relative' to men and the fact that many working-class women were wage earners in their own right, was ignored. A landmark in working-class women's education was the establishment of a Working Women's College in London in 1864. Here a 'good scholar' could learn English literature, history, physiology, drawing and Latin purely for the love of learning and for personal interest rather than in relation to the benefits others would gain from her education (Purvis, 1991).

However, whilst these social movements are generally thought of as 'working-class', they were not exclusively so. Purvis (1991) has discussed the involvement of middle class women in scientific and cultural societies, Mechanics Institutes, Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds. What is evident is the thirst for knowledge and intellectual challenge and independence denied them through the formal educational mechanisms of the period.

From the 1880s the state became increasingly involved in the provision of evening schools (Kelly, 1992). The provision for women was a narrower curriculum than that offered to men and focused on occupations such as domestic or office work. Purvis (1991) describes how

evening classes were considered by some working-class and middle-class women to be the way to 'get on', to raise their status and earn more money. This is an historical moment of disruption when some women were able to access educational provision for their own purposes. I shall describe later, the way in which the women in my study also looked to adult education as a way to improve and take more control of their lives. However, in the nineteenth century it was probably The Co-operative Women's Guild (founded 1836) rather than the State run 'night school' that helped women bring about personal and social change. Purvis (1991) and Swindells (1995) have described ways in which Guild activities helped working-class women to find a public voice and fight for emancipation - not that this was without friction at a public or familial level. Thompson (1983a) has documented the contribution that the Suffragettes, Suffragists and Co-operative Women's Guilds made to the establishment of women's trade unions and women's education. In these organisations women were able to gain skills and experience in campaigning and were able to set up educational programmes. Thus throughout the century women increasingly found ways of accessing learning opportunities and of adapting and increasing adult provision to their own needs.

In addition to access to more educational opportunities, other important related social policy changes such as the Married Women's Property Acts 1870 and 1882 (5) and the family planning movement pioneered by Marie Stopes, made it more possible for women to access education and use it to make changes in their own lives. An increasing number of women were employed in factories and the retail trades and became active in the trades union movement. The Women's Trade Union League was formed in 1874. As a result of union actions legislation was passed which led to improved pay and working conditions. After the 1870 Education Act an increasing number of women became teachers. By the end of the century nursing had also become a 'respectable' occupation for women. Clerical work expanded and a growing area for female employment. Women benefitted from new education and employment opportunities and changes in social policy brought about through pressure from working-class trades unions and middle-class reformers such as Octavia Hill and Beatrice Webb and Catherine Booth. However within these policies women of all classes were not treated equally with men. In the study which follows I shall argue that the gap between education and social policies has consistently reduced women's ability to make use of educational opportunities and that the success of current initiatives concerning widening participation in education (Kennedy, 1997) will depend on congruence between government policies.

I will now go on to describe how the early developments discussed in this first part have continued to influence the educational provision available to women in the last fifty years. I will explore some of the key debates concerning the role of adult education in women's lives, revealing persistent contradictions which have resulted in women having limited access to educational opportunities and will discuss some initiatives by women which have sought to challenge this.

WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN POST WAR BRITAIN

During the two world wars women found traditional 'feminine' employment in areas such as domestic service and 'luxury trades' like millinery and dressmaking, drastically reduced and instead they were required to take on employment which supported the war. Much of this work was in traditional male areas of employment, including skilled work in munitions factories (Braybon, 1982), as well as semi and un-skilled work in areas such as landwork and the more traditional female occupations like nursing. Their experiences changed their attitudes and aspirations and after the war there was resistance from women to being forced back into the domestic sphere.

At the start of the century the 1919 Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction recognised the role of Adult Education in supporting the changing role of women and, of importance to this study, it noted that equality of availability of education did not guarantee equality of access:

'women have far less opportunity than men for continuing their education, owing to an increasing round of household duties and care of children' ('1919 report': 255)

It is significant that a public policy report recognised women's material circumstances and identified their needs as distinct to those of men. Benn (1998) has argued that the report 'fragmented the concept of 'woman'' (Benn, 1998:42), supporting Adult Education for women which was about a liberal emancipation as well as domestic skills. However she notes that the report was to have little impact on the subsequent development of Adult Education either at the time of its publication, or in the post-second world war years. Post-war government education policy and its implementation, made a minimal response to some women's demands for opportunities to transform their roles and status within the home and workplace.

Indeed the 1944 Education Act, in line with contemporaneous social policy, re-enforced the notion that education for girls and women should recognise women's role within the family and in particular as mothers (Ministry of Education, 1947). Importantly, Wilson (1980) has argued that by emphasising access rather than equality of outcome, the structural nature of women's subordinate status was masked. Thus, although there are strong lines of continuity between nineteenth century discourses of domesticity and subordination which certainly persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century, disruptions such as changes to the traditional gendered patterns of the labour market were destabilising and challenging these well established beliefs.

I shall now briefly identify some key developments in women's education in the post war years, relating them to the wider political, social and economic context.

Urban deprivation, compensatory education and widening participation

During the 1960's public anxiety yet again focused on the 'problems of the city' - poor academic achievement, juvenile delinquency, unemployment and crime attributed to fecklessness and apathy. Thompson (1980) has written eloquently about the ways in which the 'rediscovery' of urban deprivation influenced social policy and educational provision for adults. Key political figures, such as Sir Keith Joseph, spoke publicly about 'cycles of transmitted deprivation' which supported a social pathology model of society and he suggested that the inadequate personal qualities and skills of one generation caused the poverty and deprivation of the next. A number of reports such as Plowden (Central Advisory Committee for Education, 1967) and Russell (1973) resulted in money for education being targeted on particular social groups or geographical areas. The money to support these initiatives was, as Thompson points out, very small amounts and in the case of the Urban Aid Programme, was a re-allocation of funds available to local authorities rather than additional government money.

The 1973 Russell Committee Plan for Development had a major influence on educational provision for adults. Adult education was seen as a form of social intervention which might break the cycle of deprivation by providing 'compensatory' and 'remedial' education to targeted groups. Amongst the new initiatives were the National Literacy Campaign and the development of what has become Adult Basic Education. Much of the response to Russell was

in the liberal tradition which often unproblematically grouped people under stereotypical banners such as 'the disabled' or 'the elderly'. The Russell report made very little direct reference to women and as Thompson (1997) wrote with incredulity it made,

'no reference whatsoever to one of the most significant, voluntary, independent, political, educational and spontaneous grass roots movements of recent times - the women's movement' (Thompson, 1997:46),

even though the influence of the movement was already discernible within the curriculum of adult education. Women were acknowledged to constitute a majority of students but were still being defined as relative to others,

'The working mother is particularly important, perhaps with a special educational need, and as many more women will be at work in the coming decades, the influence of working mothers on children at the starting point of the whole learning process will spread widely. There will be a need for adult education to ensure that this is a supportive influence' (Russell, quoted in Thompson, 1997:46)

Thompson notes that the tone of the Russell report implied that it was necessary for professional intervention to help working-class women in particular, acquire adequate levels of domestic skills to carry out their traditional roles. Here we see a persistence of the nineteenth century pattern which links women with not only the physical and emotional well being of families, but beyond this to the prosperity and moral health of their communities.

Whilst Thompson (1980), Keddie (1980) and other radical adult educators have criticised the analysis within the Russell report and much of the practice which resulted from it, adult learning did at least receive a higher public profile which communicated the possibilities of individual enrichment, if not social change (6).

'Second Wave Feminism' and equal opportunities for women

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a resurgence of the Women's Liberation Movement exemplified by public campaigns for equal pay and employment rights, contraception and abortion, (7) lesbian rights and rejection of violence against women. These demands were closely linked with self education and re-education of women. Women were increasingly entering the labour market as their contribution was required to support economic growth. At policy level, education and training for employment and especially career development for

women, remained of secondary importance. In the Women's Liberation Movement (8) social and personal relations became identified with political activity, in which the domestic and the personal, as well as the structural, became recognised as 'legitimate sites of struggle' (Thompson, 1995:125). Women questioned received 'wisdom' and made visible the structures which had 'hidden them from history' (Rowbotham, 1973; Greer, 1979; Spender 1982). Women's demands for greater equality of opportunity resulted in the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Equal Pay Act, 1975 and the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975 which have affected the educational and employment rights of women - although women have to continue to fight to ensure that these are not eroded.

Thus, whilst at the policy level women's learning needs were ignored or continued to focus on domestic and childcare skills, there was consensus amongst women in the Movement that girls and women were disadvantaged and that action needed to be taken to bring about change. Some women worked within education to develop provision which offered women more choice in what they studied and improved their career prospects. The developments which took place reflected the different histories and political perspectives of those involved. For some the emphasis was on 'the personal' for others on the 'political' (Coats, 1994). However, the histories and experiences of minority ethnic women were in general ignored.

Arguments were made for equal access to educational opportunities for men and women. The thrust was to open up traditional male areas of study to women and provide 'compensatory' educational opportunities for women (sometimes in single sex groups) which would make up for inadequacies in their initial education or help them return to employment after years spent in bringing up their families. Whilst the arguments for challenging sexual stereotyping in teaching and learning materials and provision of equal access to the full curriculum have been worthwhile fights which may have helped some women to move into non traditional areas, a weakness of this approach, which draws on liberal traditions, is that the structural inequalities in society which form barriers to access and limit achievement have often not been addressed. Indeed practitioner responses into the 'health' of Women's Education (Coats, 1994) revealed that men have used the 'equal opportunities' argument to challenge educational provision in women only groups, suggesting that they discriminate against men. However, other more radical approaches were also developed in the form of 'Women's Education'. Yet whilst these initiatives explored issues of gender, differences between women especially the experiences of black and lesbian women were often hidden.

‘Women’s Education’ as an aspect of educational provision for women

Until early in the twentieth century women were educated in single sex groups and individuals struggled for access to the curriculum available to their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons. In the second half of the century there have been competing tensions between women wanting education to provide opportunities where their differences from men can be explored and celebrated (as well as, more recently, the difference between women) and wanting to be given access to the same curriculum and employment possibilities as men. The position of feminism in relation to this is well described by Wilson:

Feminism embodies many theories rather than being a single discrete theory, and rather than being a politically coherent approach to the subordination of women, is a political commitment - or in some of its forms more an ethical commitment - to giving women their true value. It is not even possible to say that it is commitment to equality, since some feminists have argued, both in the past and today, for separate spheres of influence, emphasizing difference and complementarity rather than equality (Wilson, 1986:8).

Thus some women have argued for a ‘Women’s Education’ which is provided for women by women, focuses on the needs of women and values their collective and individual histories. It is education owned by women. Women’s Education, unlike education for women which has been the education thought appropriate for them, has a feminist perspective which supports the exposure and challenge of structures which disadvantage women in society. Women’s Education is women-centred and provided for women only groups (9).

Arguments in support of provision of women only education have been based on research into the effects of mixed schooling (Byrne, 1978; Spender, 1982; Arnot, 1983; Deem 1984). This research revealed that despite a rhetoric of equality of opportunity, the expectations of girls’ and boys’ behaviour and skills was different and this resulted in treatment which disadvantaged girls and limited their achievement and aspirations for the future. The need for female only educational provision, which might redress the balance and compensate for inequalities in initial education, was argued for in order to extend post-school choices for girls (Hunt and Rauta, 1975; Bennett and Carter, 1975; Licht and Dweck, 1983) and has been further developed in relation to mature women students by Coats (1994).

Established practice in Europe and the United States of America has been the model for British developments in Women’s Education (Coats, 1994). For example, the Retraveiller programme

in France provided a model for the 'return to work' and 'Wider Opportunities for Women' programmes in Britain. These programmes aimed to give women skills, often in non-traditional female occupations such as plumbing and painting and decorating, or more recently in new technology; and to give them the confidence to re-enter the job market after a break to care for their families. As Coats has described, these developments owed much not only to European legislation but also to funding such as the European Social Fund (10).

In the brief survey of recent education and training opportunities available to women, which follows, it will be seen that in some provision women have been in the majority because of the low status subject matter or because it has focused on 'traditional' female skills such as domestic cookery and flower arranging. In other provision, women-only groups have been established in an attempt to compensate women for earlier inequalities in their initial education or to help them re-establish their careers. Whilst being women focused, these groups may not necessarily be feminist in outlook and may not seek to raise women's consciousness about the structural nature of inequality. Some women-only initiatives such as the second chance education opportunities pioneered by Jane Thompson at the Women's Education Centre have been underpinned by feminist theory and have sought to empower individuals and bring about social change (11). Others have been more in the liberal feminist traditions, or have drawn together aspects of several different feminisms. However, the vast majority of ordinary women who return to education make their opportunities where they find them, be it in a course in a traditional female 'domestic' subject funded by the Local Authority, a mixed sex vocational course or an Access to higher education programme provided in a further education college and funded by central government, or a course provided through the voluntary sector.

Women in Local Authority adult education - femininity and feminism

The origins of Local Authority and voluntary sector adult education provided by Local Authorities can be found in the nineteenth century independent working class movements and liberal democratic traditions already described. As a result, the curriculum available to women in the post war years, had generally been the 'traditional women's skills and interests'. The informal nature of delivery without the requirement to pass tests, made adult education attractive to women but also meant that it had low status and marginal funding.

In the 1980s a new conceptual framework for considering adult education's relationship to society developed, which was based on the work of theorists such as Althusser (1972) (12) and Bowles and Gintis (1976). Women, including a number of practitioners in adult education, began to claim their history and question practice in terms of education's reinforcement of female stereotypes and the sexual division of labour (Deem, 1980; Hughes and Kennedy, 1985). Keddie (1980) argued that the adult education curriculum offered by LEAs, where the majority of students and lecturers were women, still followed a traditional model which confirmed women in their domestic roles as home-makers and carers, although couched in a rhetoric of 'individualism'. Thompson (1983) pointed out that the adult education curriculum offered to women was about conformity and adaptation to the established social order. However, this somewhat deterministic view did not adequately recognise the power of human agency and the fact that participation in education may result in personal growth and personal change. An adult education that could bring about social change was proposed, a curriculum of empowerment which would raise awareness and provide strategies for analysing how oppressions were structured and sustained (Johnson, 1979; Thompson, 1980). The voices of the working classes, people of colour, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, would be heard.

Whilst the traditional curriculum continued to be the mainstream, more radical initiatives were also pioneered some of which have influenced later provision albeit in a modified form. Adult and community education organised women writers groups where women could share experiences and document their reconstructed histories. Shrapnel (1982) has described how some of these women went on to take direct action in the form of rent strikes, squatting and became involved in the playgroup and nursery movement in an attempt to take control of issues that affected them. These initiatives were not widespread but are important because of their contribution to challenging 'normalising' discourses about women's position in society and the practical changes that resulted to improve women's everyday experiences. For example, the Pre-School Playgroup Association (PPA) provided women with a career route and opportunities to break the isolation of motherhood and to network and lobby local and national opinion formers.

Other developments in terms of educational opportunities for women became widely established in adult and community education and some further education colleges began to expand from their traditional cohort of 16-19 year old students to run a limited programme for

mature students. These included :- Fresh Start, New Opportunities for Women, Women's Studies, pre-access to higher education and other 'second chance' education and training initiatives. Coats (1994) has noted that since the 1992 FHE Act, there has been a decrease in provision of non-certificated 'first steps' courses which aim at encouraging women back into education but an increase in courses encouraging women back to work. The emphasis has been on vocational, at the expense of non accredited short courses and women's studies programmes. These changes have been brought about by Government policy which has altered the structure and funding of education and training

Non-standard entry and the growth of Access courses

One of the most important developments to come out of the women's education programmes in the 70's and 80's has been Access courses (13). Benn and Fieldhouse (1991) have argued that the introduction of Access to Higher Education Scheme initiatives by the Labour Government in 1978 (and supported by successive Conservative Governments) was intended to widen access to post-school education and relieve some of the tensions which had become evident within society which had become,

'increasingly divided by social, gender, regional and racial inequalities and beset with a variety of escalating social problems, ranging from structural unemployment to rising criminality, homelessness and racial discrimination' (Benn and Fieldhouse, 1991:8)

Thus politicians started to build on developments pioneered by women in the 1960s (14). The development of Access is well documented elsewhere (Lieven, 1989; Benn and Fieldhouse, 1991; Kelly, 1992; Fieldhouse et al, 1996). However, in the context of this study it is important to note the success of this targeted provision, designed to provide a supportive environment in which adults without A levels can reach the academic level required for entry into higher education. This, together with more flexible entry criteria, has widened access to higher education to previously under-represented social groups including women, the working classes, the unemployed, minority ethnic groups and others who have historically gained least from initial education.

An important development was kite-marking the growing number of Access courses which meant a change from fixed-link arrangements between institutions to national standards and

criteria allowing students more choice of HE courses. There were approximately 36,000 adult students on Access to HE programmes in the UK in 1994-5 (HEQC, 1995) and in 1995 more mature students progressed to degree programmes via Access courses than via any other route (UCAS, 1995).

Thompson (1995) has argued that the success of attempts in the 1980s to push forward the frontiers of women's education to make it accessible, especially to working class women and women from ethnic minorities, has resulted in initiatives being subsumed within the mainstream and the 'cutting edge' blunted. She suggests that Access courses, Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) and alternative approaches to validating learning have now been appropriated by further education to meet market requirements to increase participation and their significance in terms of arguments about cultural politics and critical intelligence, feminism and empowerment have been lost. She does acknowledge the advance in terms of the establishment of Women's Studies and Gender Studies in colleges and universities. She writes,

'No self-respecting FE college is without its Access provision, comprised not exclusively, but predominantly, of lower middle-class women. No self-seeking university is without its franchise deals and credit transfer schemes, aimed at maximising its quota of 'non-traditional' students within the overall constraints of student numbers. In the process, of course, something of the politics and passion has been lost' (Thompson, 1995:128)

She believes that it is the opportunity to generate 'new customers' within the education market that is being seized on, rather than any notion of empowerment within a feminist framework.

Whilst I understand the thrust of her argument, in the study that follows I shall attempt to show that some women students have been able to access further education (15) for a broad range of purposes. Many of the mature students I interviewed for this study are critically aware of their position, determined to use educational provision for their own purposes and are managing not only to improve their own life chances but in many instances are using their skills to affect change in their communities, albeit often through traditional female 'caring' roles.

Vocational Training and women in Further Education

It could be argued most education that has been available to women has been 'vocational' in that it was designed to improve their work skills, which were to be employed in unwaged

labour in the home. In addition, these skills in cookery, needlework and nursing equally suited women to paid employment.

In the 1970s the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) offered Government funded 'Wider Opportunities for Women' (WOW) and similar women focused programmes in order to attract women into employment. These courses were available as short, independent units, often in further education colleges. They also ran Training Opportunities Programmes (TOPs) often in traditional female occupational areas such as office skills, but also in some less traditional areas as well. Successor government training agencies developed the training offer to women into the 'traditionally' male dominated manual trades such as carpentry and motor mechanics, following the example of other European countries. These courses set out to intervene in areas of social and educational inequality and offered not only new areas of study to women, but also different styles of learning including collaborative student centred approaches which valued individuals' experience and contribution (Coats, 1994).

More recently further education colleges, sometimes in partnership with business, have set up skills up-dating schemes to attract back into employment women with qualifications who have had time out to care for their families. Typically these courses cover technical or legislative changes in the relevant industry such as word-processing for skilled typists, new materials and techniques in fashion related subjects, food hygiene qualifications for catering. Whilst this training may help women to re-establish their careers, this may often be in traditional female occupations. Some courses offer professional up-dating for graduates and there are also courses which aim to encourage more women to progress into management. The growth of these single sex courses, which have promoted empowerment of women and given them opportunities to progress and achieve careers, has been important. However these informal ways into education are now under threat. Firstly unless the course results in a qualification (up until recently many have not, as this can be a barrier to women returners) it will not attract government funding and secondly 'positive discrimination' in terms of women only groups is now seen unnecessary by those who imagine that the rhetoric of access to education for all is a reality and that there are no longer barriers to prevent women from participating (O'Rourke, 1995).

The clear project of recent Conservative governments and currently the new Labour government is that the public funding of adult learning should have a vocational focus. Yet as

I shall presently argue, the current FE curriculum may ill equip students for the real world of work where there have been fundamental changes in the economy resulting in a labour market which requires an increasingly casualised work force employed on short term contracts, often on low levels of pay.

The globalisation of capital and the advances in new technologies, especially in computerised communications, has resulted in 24 hour demand for services. Our consumer society has come to value 'newness', disposability and instantaneity and working practices have therefore developed to meet customer demand. This may have increased employment opportunities for women but may have a personal 'cost'. For example, one of the women students in my study also worked a late shift (until 10.30 p.m.) two nights a week and on Sundays, in her local supermarket whilst a relative looked after her family.

Economic and labour market changes in relation to women's employment and education

Within this necessarily brief overview of women's involvement in non-advanced education it is possible to trace struggles, advances and checks to progression brought about by persistent discourses concerning women's role. The discourses which position them in relation to their homes and families have resulted in conflicting processes which affect their employment, underpin their education and make them especially susceptible to economic change. Structural aspects, such as differential access to good quality, affordable childcare, have also limited many women's choices about returning to education or employment.

Thompson (1988) has suggested that women have silently been returned to the invisibility of the home. Women have taken the brunt of the collapse of the welfare state, undertaking responsibility for unwaged community care of elderly and sick relatives. When companies have been hit by economic recession, it has often been women's jobs that have been the first to go because women have often worked in less unionised fields. Employers in some parts of the manufacturing and retail industries have seen women as 'casual labour', employing them on a 'cheaper' part time basis. Employers have not invested in training such women (16) and they have therefore been more susceptible to 'downsizing' whereas the skilled workers, usually men, have tended to be kept on until business picks up.

Where women have gained employment in less traditional areas of female employment, beliefs and attitudes which link women's key role within the domestic sphere have also resulted in women being 'blamed' for taking 'men's jobs' and perhaps it has also made them less confident in asserting their rights to employment over men. Bruegel (1979) has suggested that this perception may also have contributed to a higher female 'voluntary' redundancy rate as well as supported discriminatory practices by employers and unions. In general, female unemployment is not considered the personal and social problem which male unemployment is. Economic depression has often been characterised as youth unemployment and the loss of men's jobs in industry and the collapse of small businesses. As a result education funding has been targeted on youth unemployment projects, re-skilling for industry and business enterprise schemes. To a degree, women have been 'scared' back into the home by media linkage between poor mothering and innumerable social ills, although this 'choice' is very different for a well qualified middle-class woman with a highly paid partner and a lone mother or a woman in a working-class family where there are no waged adults. Some women who have worked have had to bear the anger and disaffection of male partners and older children who have not been able to find paid employment themselves.

Yet at the same time as some women have lost their jobs, the expansion of parts of the service sector and the demand for a cheap 'flexible' workforce has protected some forms of female employment. Women's employment has quietly been re-structured in terms of the new economy. There has been a steady increase in the proportion of part time and temporary workers in the British workforce over the past few years (CBI, 1996). At the present time 85% of part time workers and 56% of temporary workers are women (Uden, 1996). Women are the majority of new entrants to the labour market and it is predicted that in the next ten years 80% of the increase in the total workforce will be women joining or re-joining the workforce (CBI survey, 1994). However women are disproportionately represented in lower grade jobs. A woman with the same characteristics as a man is 25% less likely to possess a higher level qualification because of her sex (17). This unequal certification of work-related skills helps to sustain inequalities in pay, career progression and the perception of skill thereby maintaining male dominance in the workplace (Felstead, 1996).

There has been innovative practice in relation to women's education and successful initiatives to increase the number of mature women from all social groups participating in post

compulsory education. Yet, the indication is that the vast majority of women still opt for courses which are in the traditional female areas of the curriculum. Sargant's research (1991) found that women are proportionately more highly represented than men in office skills, health and social care, hairdressing and beauty, business and administration and the creative arts. There are also signs of a backlash against initiatives which support new opportunities for women and are therefore a threat to men (Coats, 1994; Thompson, 1995). An example of this is the way in which the need for women-only education is being challenged with arguments which include the assertion that girls perform better than boys at school and women no longer need positive action or special consideration (Wilby, 1998). These arguments fail to recognise the true position of women or the real reasons why women-only provision is needed (Coats, 1994; Rowan, 1998; Gipps and Murphy, 1998). Further analysis of participation in education, achievement of qualifications and salary reveals that issues of 'race' and class also impact on life-chance (FEFC, 1997).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that despite political, economic and technological changes over time, women remain positioned within contradictory discourses concerning their relationship with domestic duties and the external world of work. Whilst differences between women mean that their experiences are not the same, whatever their position in society, women have consistently had fewer opportunities than men to benefit from education.

Individual women and groups of women have resisted oppressive definitions of their roles and their actions have led to policy change. Women today undoubtedly have more rights than their mothers or grandmothers, for example divorce is now easier and women have more control over their own fertility (18). Many more women have paid employment and an increasing number are able to go to university and develop professional careers. However comparatively few women, regardless of 'race' or class, have reduced their domestic responsibilities.

Despite the advances that have been made to challenge male values and control of women's education and lives, there are startling reminders in the study which follows of how little change there has been in the problems and choices faced by many ordinary women. In order to understand why this is so, in the next chapter I will discuss recent government education policy

and examine the contradictions and tensions which are played out at local level. I will argue that policy which has led to the recent expansion of post-compulsory education, which appears to offer women more opportunities to access education than ever before, has embedded within it structural inequalities which privilege male interests and experience.

In what follows I shall seek to expose the tension within education policy which simultaneously encourages women to pursue their individual interests, be competitive and gain the qualifications and skills which will benefit the economy and society, whilst also urging them to develop their parenting skills to fulfil their role within the family. I shall argue that, as in the past, the majority of managers, decision makers, opinion leaders and theorists are men who are continuing to define what is appropriate for women to learn and the mode of study. The 'new' FE is being constructed on male values, male definitions and male authority, but the rhetoric of patriarchy feeds it back in a degendered and normalising form, ostensibly representing the wider experience of the population, and credited with objective truth.

NOTES

1. Extract from the introduction of *Life as We Have Known It*, (Ed. Margaret Llewellyn Davies, Hogarth Press, 1931) a collection of letters by Co-operative Working Women in which they described their lives.
2. Clementina Black was a suffragette active in the Women's Protective and Provident League, the Women's Industrial Council and the Anti-Seating League and founded the Women's Trade Union Association. Her report (1909/10) *Married Women's Work* 1909/10 paints a vivid picture of the living conditions of married working class women and gives an insight into the attitude towards working mothers, poverty, male violence and the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor'.
3. Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee of Physical Deterioration, 1904.
4. Emily Davies was instrumental in persuading the Oxford and Cambridge local examination boards to allow girls to sit their examinations in 1863.
5. The Married Women's Property Acts gave women increased financial independence from their husbands. They gained the right to keep their own earnings (1870) and their own belongings including clothes and money (1882).
6. At the time of writing the Widening Participation Committee of the FEFC chaired by Helena Kennedy has just published its plan for development 'Learning Works'. Strands of these earlier policies and debates can be clearly identified. The media have been identified as key partners in this new attempt to encourage a wider section of society to become involved in education and training.
7. The drop in the birth rate connected to scientific advances and feminist thought and action has meant that women generally have fewer children and spend comparatively less time devoted to childcare than their mothers or grandmothers. Their expectations and attitudes to their roles

have changed. Although as my study will show, women's control of their fertility and childcare remain issues in relation to the choices they have about their lives

8. In this context I am not using patriarchy in the Weberian sense of the father-dominated household where he controlled economic production and dominated the family and its extensions, but as the concept has been further developed by radical feminist writers such as Millett. Here the meaning is extended to the oppression of women and the dominance of men in society in general although the notion of patriarchy has been further explored by feminist writers in terms of the different experiences of women in relation to their class, race and sexual orientation
9. The 1986 amendment to section 47 of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act allows for single sex provision in certain circumstances including training for employment those who have not been in regular full time employment for a time because of domestic or family responsibilities. EOC 1986.
10. Out of the women in my study Michelle and Lizzie had returned to education on ESF funded courses. The special funding of these courses provided luncheon vouchers and additional money for childcare and materials supporting the needs of women who would not otherwise be able to afford returning to education.
11. Britain's first Women's Education Centre was opened in 1981 with resources of Southampton university, LEA and WEA (with some EOC funding also) combined to provide a comprehensive range of courses and activities to meet the expressed needs of women. Women members were also actively involved in making centre policy. As the creative force behind the centre, Thompson held central her belief that women-centred education represented the intellectual dimension of the struggle for women's liberation. Its purpose - raising consciousness, developing theories and social change.
12. Althusser (1972) argued that capitalist societies require the continued reproduction of the relations of production; that is the dominance by a small number of elite over the general mass of workers. Education, according to Althusser exerted control via ideology and had a hidden function of ensuring a supply of workers, petty bourgeois, agents of repression or professional ideologists - each imbued with an ideology fitting him or her for this role.
13. Although a number of early Access courses were designed specifically for women and the majority of students, particularly on humanities and social sciences courses, have traditionally been women, courses are usually open to both men and women.
14. The most notable example was the Fresh Horizons programme developed by Enid Hutchinson at the City Literary Institute, London.
15. Five of the students in my study were on kite-marked Access courses and two on non kite-marked Access courses.
16. According to the Labour Force Survey, women receive more training than men. However, when health and safety training and induction are excluded, this is reversed. The bulk of funding for training goes to managerial and technical training and therefore to men, as they tend to have these posts. (Rees, 1997).
17. Felstead (1996) has suggested that women's relatively poor attainment of vocational qualifications, particularly at the higher levels, can be linked to lack of facilities to relieve them of childcare while participating in a course.
18. Women's demand for control over their own fertility re-emerged as an important issue in the second wave feminist movement. Scientific advances such as the contraceptive pill and legislation such as the 1967 Abortion Act were important landmarks.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEMPORARY THEMES IN EDUCATION POLICY

Introduction

As a result of changes in economic patterns and educational reform during the last fifteen years, adult learners have been presented with new opportunities and constraints. The student body in both higher and further education has changed considerably and there are now greater numbers of adult students studying on award bearing courses. Government pressure on higher and further education institutions to expand, has resulted in mature students being identified as a new market sector through which growth targets can be met (1). Consequently, there has been a new flexibility in entry requirements, course structure, modes of attendance and methods of assessment (2) McGivney (1996:3) notes that in 1994 approximately 80% of universities and colleges had developed, or were committed to developing modular arrangements and Davies (1995) estimates that there were approximately 13,000 Access entrants to higher education in 1993. This trend is set to continue when the Dearing report is implemented (3).

The increased availability of places in further education and the greater flexibility of the educational offer coinciding with the dramatic reduction of Local Authority educational provision for adults, has contributed to a significant growth in the proportion of adult students (usually defined as people over 19 years old, DfEE statistical returns) as opposed to the traditional 16 - 19 year old cohort. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) Chief Inspector's report for 1994-95 indicated that approximately three quarters of students in the sector were now adults. More mature women than ever before, including a higher proportion from ethnic minority groups, are now progressing to higher education (McGivney, 1996:7).

In what follows, I shall discuss the ways in which government policy has impacted on the learning opportunities available to adult students. I shall identify the dominant discursive formations which underpin recent changes in education policy and describe the mechanisms which have been used to insert market forces into the further education sector: this will include a brief discussion of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and the changes arising out of the subsequent separation of colleges from Local Education Authority control.

New Right political influence

The election and re-election of consecutive Conservative Governments in the 1980s and 1990s in an economic context of decline and recession brought about many changes in the area of public sector spending. Education legislation and in particular the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was shaped by the philosophy of neo-liberalism and the assault on any public spending which was not clearly related to economic prosperity. What has become known as a 'New Right' in politics developed amid Britain's economic decline within the World wide crisis of capitalist economies. The collapse of the post-war political consensus which supported social democratic principles and the Welfare State created the opportunity for 'New Right' influence on policy (Baron, Finn, Grant, Green and Johnson, 1980). The description 'New Right' has been differently attached by theorists and commentators to the various ideological strands and formations of neo-liberal and neo-conservative thinkers. (In the context of this discussion I am using the term 'New Right' as defined by Levitas (1986) to include both the neo-liberal strand of free market economism informed by theorists such as Milton Friedman and Friederich von Hayek and the neo-conservative strand of state authority and traditional moral values informed by philosophers such as Roger Scruton.)

Neo-liberalism owes much to the assertion by Hayek (1962), that the market has superiority over alternative forms of planning, as it produces a type of 'moral naturalism' based on the notion that social actors' instinct is to be competitive and entrepreneurial and attempt to achieve social advantage over others. A key influence on social policy has been the assertion by neo-liberal economists that free markets should operate with minimal state intervention and that market principles should be applied to public services (at least what were public services) such as health and education (Grace, 1991). The market has brought with it the laws of supply and demand, the theory that competition leads to increased efficiency and the devolution of funds in a search for more accountability. The reduction of the base budget given to colleges and rewards of additional funding for enterprise and efficiency, have encouraged compliance with government policy.

Jones (1989) has suggested that between the neo-liberal marketeers and neo-conservative traditionalists can be identified a separate strand of 'modernisers' who share some of the same aims as the free market thinkers, but believe that the way to create the enterprise economy is through state intervention and rejection of Victorian values in favour of bourgeois

entrepreneurism. The 'modernisers' argue that in order for Britain to compete with other industrialised nations it must shed the remnants of its aristocratic humanist curriculum. However Jones notes the concern expressed by New Right 'modernisers' that the educational establishment in alliance with traditionalists, may attempt to hi-jack reform. He claims that those who have attained status through knowledge have always fought to maintain their elite position. However, within quasi-education markets there are complex power relationships, alliances and tensions between different political groupings at central and local government level and educational professionals, (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998).

The main concepts of Conservative political theory were identified by Belsey (1986:174) as 'tradition, authority and allegiance' - maintaining the established social order through the authority of the state. In all this, the family became an ideological battleground for 'moral entrepreneurs' (Hall,1986:16) who argued for a return to alleged 'traditional family values' (which I shall discuss later in relation to the experience of women returners to further education). Some areas in which civil rights had been progressed are now being eroded in part, through policy changes by the state and the monitoring and enforcement of equal opportunities legislation is seen to have slipped from the agenda.

It is important to realise that the different strands of the New Right attach different meanings and weight to concepts such as freedom and individualism, therefore within the theories and policies of the New Right there can be found inconsistencies and contradictions, the most important of which is the tension between the free market and central control (Chitty, 1989; Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998). This translates in the further education sector as a framework which has established colleges as 'private companies' yet which are dependent on a government quango, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for funding and planning purposes (Elliott, 1996:4).

Public service and education markets

The major projects of the New Right have been to set a new agenda in economic and social policy and attempt to dismantle the Welfare State, marking a shift away from notions of community and collective responsibility (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995:4). Under New Right influence Conservative Governments made changes in every phase of state education, also in

the Health Services with initiatives which included 'Care in the Community', 'fund holding' G.Ps and hospital trusts; and in the State Benefits system, schemes such as the 'Jobseekers Allowance'. Gewirtz, Bowe and Ball (1995:5) point out that what were formerly near monopolistic forms of state provision were replaced with competitive individual ones which shared similar features such as devolved budgets, charters with publicly stated levels of service, published performance indicators, 'value for money' initiatives and efficiency led management. However, as has been discussed by Saltman and von Otter (1992); Le Grand and Bartlett (1993) and Gewirtz, Bowe and Ball (1995), each of these markets is constructed and operated in different ways. Markets are also local and therefore in one geographical area there may be schools, sixth form centres, colleges and voluntary and private sector organisations all competing for the same students. Markets are also differently experienced by people according to their social and economic status. The market being examined in this study is the education market which has been constructed in the further education sector. (In later chapters I shall discuss how the combined effect of these wider changes in the public services impact on the lives of women students returning to education).

Education markets, are not true 'free markets' they are 'quasi-markets' with a strong political steer (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). This means that there is limited choice available to would be students; only a small amount of money is spent by the customer by way of fees, with the bulk of money coming from the government and dependent on colleges meeting performance targets. Choices are made within clear boundaries which have been defined by government policy. As Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) have pointed out, 'Government retains control of, and imposes a system of performance indicators upon the market' (Gewirtz et al, 1995:3). In the case of further education it is a requirement that colleges make public their performance in relation to recruitment, retention and results 'the new 3Rs' as I shall discuss in detail in chapter 6. In this way the market allows politicians to 'steer at a distance' (Kickert, 1991; Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998) to influence practice, yet detach themselves from responsibility for any of the problems arising from their policies.

In the FE sector colleges are given the 'freedom' to provide educational services as they see fit, within the legal, financial and quality constraints emanating from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, and in line with 'demands' for education and training made by local people. Local businesses and individual 'consumers' of education are therefore encouraged to make choices as to which college courses and services best meet their needs, and provide 'good value

for money' and to require colleges to meet the entitlements promised in their charters. Colleges are therefore 'disciplined', in theory at least, by consumer choice. Colleges which are efficient and responsive will flourish and those which are inefficient and fail to deliver good quality services will go under. During the year ended 31st July 1995 the sector made an operating deficit of £101 million, which was 2.7% of the turnover for the period (TES, 1996) and five years after incorporation there are a significant number of colleges with financial problems (4).

Students and colleges are thus both disciplined by choices. If students fail to make use of the opportunities available to them it is their own fault or the fault of the educational provider.

'The energetic and careful are rewarded and the slothful and ignorant are punished. If things go wrong, then misguided consumers or tardy producers are to blame, not politicians' (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995:1)

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act

Jones (1989) has described the way in which Conservatism targeted the education system as part of the Welfare State and presented it as 'a system that has escaped rational control' (Jones, 1989:5). The service especially under local Labour control, had become in the eyes of the Government,

'A nest of minority causes which interfere with the rights and opportunities of the majority' (Jones, 1989:5)

The Conservative Government therefore devised ways to control the content and process of education through financial allocation and control and through legislation. The passing of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was a key move to promote the progression of Conservative Policy and market values in the public sector - competition, efficiency and value for money together with the rhetoric of choice and raising of standards. The Act concerned the wide ranging reform of both Further and Higher Education. However in the context of this study I will confine my comments to those aspects which had a direct bearing on the FE sector and affected adult learners in particular.

The division of adult learning into vocational and leisure courses

For the first time adult learners were to be recognised as a section of the community with a statutory right to receive education, but the definition of what type of education could be funded by the Government and what was to be made available (to an unspecified level) by local authorities, was clearly defined. What emerged in the Act was a separation of what was described as 'vocational' and 'leisure'. Vocational courses could be provided in FE colleges, adult education institutes or the voluntary sector but would need to conform to the particular requirements defined in Schedule 2 of the Act in order to receive funding from the Further Education Funding Councils (FEFCs) (5). Provision eligible for funding included courses leading to accreditation via NVQs, GCSEs, GCE AS and A levels; courses giving access to higher level courses in FE and HE; adult literacy and basic skills (ABE) English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) and some Special Educational Needs (SEN). Other provision, such as community history groups or non- accredited courses in languages and the visual and performing arts which, it was argued, were more to do with notions of leisure and personal development than vocation, was to be the responsibility of Local Authorities to fund. The stage was therefore set for educational provision for adults to be split into 'vocational' and 'leisure' courses with little reference to the fact that adults themselves did not necessarily make these separations. As the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) pointed out,

'Every major study confirms that student purpose cannot be predicted by the title or ostensible purpose of a course' (NIACE, 1991)

NIACE (1991) commented that some established businesses such as Ford, Lucas and Rover had recognised this through the provision of their employee education schemes (6). If government was trying to provide a better trained workforce for industry, industry had already moved towards a broader definition of what kind of learning activities benefited their employees and their business.

NIACE also pointed out that a characteristic of adult learning is that students' intentions change as a result of their involvement in the learning process and that to separate out programmes of learning into vocational and leisure was unhelpful and narrow sighted. The separation failed to recognise that people returning to study, who may be lacking in self confidence, often prefer to start with a course that builds on skills and interests that they already have, and do not want the pressure of coursework and examinations. They may

however make use of the opportunities to progress to accredited courses and more advanced courses in due course. There can be no time limit on how long this process may take. People with difficulties and family pressures may need several years of part-time study to reach the point when they have the confidence and the skills to move on, as I shall illustrate with the field data in the main chapters of this study. So whilst the new status of some adult programmes was welcomed by practitioners there were other aspects which gave cause for concern. The separation of the different strands of adult education may well have the effect of weakening progression routes for the very people that the government say they want to encourage back to study, or perhaps more precisely back to work.

Implications for women

New legislation stimulates much discussion and debate, yet what was not focused on in the educational press, or NIACE commentaries at the launch of the white paper or subsequent debate over the Bill, was the gendered definition of work implicit in the Act. The only work that is recognised as eligible for public funding is paid employment, the domestic work that is mostly carried out by women within the home and which services capital, is ignored. Non accredited courses, which many women have used as a first step back into education, would now be provided by Local Authorities. Courses provided by FE colleges would have a strictly vocational focus, involving students in coursework, assessments and examinations.

These changes have had particular implications for women. If women choose to develop their skills through non-accredited Local Authority provision this is defined as 'leisure'; yet, as I have described in chapter 1, it could be argued that the traditional LEA provision for women has focused on helping them become better at the 'job' of caring for the family. Many contemporary aspects of social policy have attempted to shift responsibility away from government and onto individuals - away from the public and into the private (Reay, 1998); a 'private' which has become synonymous with women and the family. When influential political advisers such as Professor Michael Barber of the Institute of Education promote the idea of teaching parenting skills in order to solve problems in the education system, it is clear that the 'problems' are being 'blamed' on poor mothering rather than highlighting the real causes which Oakley and Mayall (1996) have correctly identified as the underfunding of public services. So although the physical care and education of children is presented by governments as being

important work, if women are to be able to acquire these skills through adult education courses, then they must pay for this themselves.

Changes in the way in which adult learning was to be funded within the Act combined with increased pressures on Local Authorities to reduce public spending has resulted in an increase in courses meeting FEFC funding criteria and a reduction of LEA provision. As a high proportion of Adult Education students have traditionally been women, this has disproportionately affected local educational opportunities for women.

- Mature women now have a statutory right to education and in theory at least, the opportunity to gain qualifications and achieve economic independence. However, the 'New Further Education' appears as firmly constructed on male authority, male values such as status and power and male definitions of what constitutes a valid (and therefore publicly funded) programme of learning as was the 'Old FE'. It is individual achievement within a competitive framework that is valued. There is no room for community or co-operative learning. Success is measured in the short term by the demonstration of instrumental competencies. Learning for intrinsic reasons, personal development and self expression is not to be funded through the public purse.

Whilst the 'modernisers' are arguing for women to learn new skills, gain qualifications and contribute directly to the growth of the economy, the 'traditionalists' are issuing dire warnings about the breakdown of 'the family' and the corruption of moral values (Jones, 1989). Educational and welfare policies embody these tensions (Grace, 1991) and women are faced with managing the contradictions and inequalities which result.

The 'modernisers' - attempts to bridge the academic/vocational divide and training for commerce and industry

The bulk of the work of the traditional FE college had always consisted of vocationally oriented courses for 16-19 year olds; GCSEs and A levels, City and Guilds and RSA craft, business and industry qualifications. Over the years, with the end of the old apprenticeships, the movement away from heavy industry to service industries and economic recession which left

companies shedding rather than recruiting employees, FE looked to new groups of students and to new education programmes.

In the 1980s the Conservative Government set up a succession of 'training agencies'. These increased central control of the content and process of education and training while helping to conceal rising unemployment figures. FE colleges eagerly bid for the work and set up new courses. Many of the courses were aimed at youth employment, Youth Opportunities (YOP) and Youth Training Schemes (YTS) but an increasing number of initiatives were introduced to re-train adults to return to work, e.g. Training Opportunities (TOPs). Alongside the special training programmes for adult returners, mature groups for subjects such as nursery nursing, secretarial and clerical were added to the traditional post school offering, with colleges quickly realising that the older students were happier studying in a group of people their own age rather than mixed in with a crowd of young people. Yet this was often a 'gendered' course offer, firmly based on the traditional 'female' curriculum - women 'caring' for children or supporting men in the workplace.

The 1992 Education Act attempted to bridge the academic/vocational divide, raise the status of vocational courses and supply a suitably trained and skilled workforce. The Act presented a vision of a 'new education' which would inspire and sustain economic growth. Yet as Jones (1989) had already identified,

'Conservative education policy, Janus-headed, fuses the archaic and the modern, mixes nostalgia with technology, evokes community and promotes entrepreneurship' (Jones, 1989:1)

The 1992 Act can be seen as an attempt to remove the academic/practical barrier and recognise achievement through new systems such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). However what emerges is a public commitment to move towards parity of esteem that will erode the academic-vocational divide yet without the recognition of the structures which maintain the status of some types of knowledge and class formation.

Within the Act can be found an apparent endorsement of aspects of progressive education alongside criticism of this approach to learning. As Jones (1989) had already identified, paradoxically the thrust towards an education which fits people to the role identified by

industrialists and helps them to become flexible, collaborative, problem-solvers, could be seen to be best achieved through the practices of 'progressive education'. Yet progressive education had been identified by the right with falling standards, poor discipline and the failure of the education system.

In order to ensure that the New FE was forced into working with industry a number of new initiatives and mechanisms were put into place - colleges were required to compete with each other to bid for funding for work related further education courses (WRFE) to the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), quangos with boards of directors dominated by representatives of local business. Representatives of commerce and industry were to be the majority on the corporation or governing bodies (not the student, despite the rhetoric of consumer choice). National Targets for Education and Training (NTETs) were set, (7) National Vocational Qualifications NVQs were launched, with standards set by the industry themselves and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) was created; all further steps to present a vision of a 'new education' which would inspire and sustain economic growth.

Incorporation

The 1992 Act removed FE from Local Education Authority (LEA) control and established colleges as independent corporations with charitable status. On the 1st April 1993 those educational establishments meeting the criteria laid down in the Act became independent of their LEA, controlled instead by newly constituted governing bodies which strongly represented the interests of local employers and were funded directly by the FEFC for those parts of their programmes which were eligible for Government funding. College managers found themselves with a range of new responsibilities. Among them, 'estates' which now meant not just caretaking and minor repairs, but a whole estates and accommodation strategy with responsibility for the long-term maintenance and repair of college buildings, many of which had been neglected for years by Local Authorities squeezed by Government action to reduce public spending. They also became responsible for 'human resources' requiring the establishment of a personnel section. Further Government action in terms of the requirement for colleges to introduce new staff contracts and new employment legislation (8) has necessitated senior staff taking on new responsibilities and acquiring new skills. Colleges have also had to set up their own finance departments and decide which services such as payroll, they would buy in and

which they would run in-house. Most colleges have had to invest additional money in their computer management information systems in order to meet the requirements for statistical information from the FEFC.

The cost of incorporation to colleges has been high in terms of the additional start-up costs of employing new staff and creating new systems and paying legal fees incurred through the transfer of assets from the LEA to the college. It has also had a cost in terms of the altered culture, which I shall discuss in chapter 6.

The policy move towards de-centralisation and local management of colleges does not however mean an unequivocal rolling back of the powers of the state but rather a re-assertion of the authority of central government via training agencies, funding councils and TECs (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998). As has already been discussed, the authority is central but the responsibility is devolved. Colleges are required to make explicit their mission, the strategy for achieving it and the quality mechanisms in place to police its achievement - this is then monitored via inspection and audit by the FEFC and performance made public through reports and performance tables.

Further Education Funding Councils (FEFCs)

The distribution and monitoring of public funds to the sector (3 billion in 1995/6) is managed by regional FEFCs, government quangos. These Councils have a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements in place to assess the quality of provision in the Further Education sector. Their inspectorates inspect and report on each college in the sector every four years and also assess and report on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and quality issues (FEFC, 1996a). In addition, the FEFCs monitor college performance through audit and via statistical returns. This data is used as part of the funding mechanism for individual colleges and also provides sector wide data which can be used for comparative purposes, 'benchmarking' or to demonstrate trends in the sector as a whole.

Funds were initially allocated to colleges according to historical funding levels but quickly moved to a complex formula which encouraged growth in student numbers, improved completion rates and achievement (9). Colleges have moved from the uncertainties of funding

under LEAs to a very clear picture of what funding will be available and the conditions which will have to be met to gain it. They have moved from local accountability to a very different type of public accountability based on theories of the free market. With funding following the student, student choice has become a central concern

Features of the Market - competition, managerialism, quality systems

As independent 'businesses' colleges are now in competition with each other and with other similar providers of education and training. Concerns have shifted from managing education to managing an education business. Selling education has required the development of new skills such as marketing and publicity and a shift has occurred towards the commodification of education and a different type of relationship is developing between students, lecturers and senior college staff (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992). A new kind of manager and a new style of management is evident within the sector. A 'managerialism' with many features imported from business is replacing professional control. There has been a growth in the number of publications and courses on education management which have had a significant impact in the sector. This is evidenced by language and the outward appearance of institutions both in terms of building ambience and literature. The discourse of 'managerialism' in education which owes much to the concerns of commerce and business, has given rise to a shift in values and practices (Grace, 1993; Clarke, 1995).

Consumer power is being used as a tool to ensure efficiency and 'value for money' with colleges required to make public their service standards and methods of dealing with customer complaints. The DFE published the Charter for Further Education in September 1993. All colleges were required, as a condition of FEFC funding, to produce their own charters by summer 1994. Within these documents colleges are required to inform students of their entitlements and employers of the level of service that will be provided. Whilst the inspectorate criticised colleges for their reluctance to commit themselves to challenging and precise performance targets, (FEFC, 1996a) legal advice to college managers was to be wary of committing themselves to levels of service that they might not be able to achieve and thereby end up dealing with time consuming and costly legal actions which might also affect their reputation and damage recruitment.

Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998) have noted the powerful control that central government exerts through the mechanism of inspection and performance indicators. The annual publication of college reports on their performance against charter commitments, examination results and surveys of the views of students and employers, together with quadrennial inspection reports, places colleges in the public eye but what is being measured, whose interests and values are privileged? James Paice, then Education Minister, whilst criticising colleges for the number of students leaving courses 'unfit for the labour market', told delegates at the Association of Colleges conference that colleges should prioritise publication of information on student destinations as tax payers had the right to know 'what is the employment and higher education return for their investment in the FE system' (THES, 1996:3). Charters and performance league tables are tools of the market. I suggest that a crucial function is to act as manipulators of public opinion rather than to inform or support individuals in making informed choices. Goldstein and Myers (1996) have argued that league tables present very narrow and crude definitions of quality, based on short-term outputs which are without context.

In addition, colleges are required to have their own internal quality assurance systems which link to their charter commitments. This can best be regarded as a form of 'internal policing' designed to combat declining standards. These systems, often adapted from models used in industry e.g. BS5750, have been seen to lead to the increasing bureaucratisation of education (McElwee, 1992) and are a further manifestation of the drift towards managerialism (Becher and Kogan, 1992) and away from professionalism. The insistence on internal verification by external validating bodies such as Edexcel (formerly BTEC) and quality assurance systems by the FEFC, which often require additional staff time to double mark student work or monitor the quality of teaching via classroom observations, are yet more examples of the way in which the responsibility and costs of increasing requirements to demonstrate 'value for money' are being shifted onto colleges at a time when government funding is decreasing (10).

The language of the market

FE has always been characterised by its use of acronyms. Many new ones have been added as a result of changes in the sector - 'TQM' (Total Quality Management), VFM (Value for Money), NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications). Educational jargon has become mixed with the language of business. New language and new meanings attached to old language

struggle together in the New FE. Quality in terms of excellence and professionalism does not carry the same meaning as Total Quality Management - a standardising system imported from industry.

Those staff who have become 'bilingual' have established their own positions of power within the hierarchy (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995:97). As Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe have suggested, the new language is important as a signifier of transformations which are occurring at a deeper level: a shift in educational decision making which moves away from educational considerations towards budget-driven ones, in what they call a 'values-drift'. Decisions are made in order to secure the success and survival of the institution rather than in the best interests of the learner or community. In this way, it has been my experience as a senior manager in a college that more day to day management time is now spent discussing business issues than curriculum issues and that considerations of 'value for money' and 'cost benefit analyses' are the deciding factors in strategic planning.

The 'language' is as much a visual and symbolic language as a verbal one. As Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe describe, messages are transmitted via the quality of marketing literature - what they call 'glossification' as much as through the choice of language. Choices are made about the image that colleges need to project in order to attract the 'right' customers. They gather market information prior to the launch of a 'new product' (course) and analyse the effectiveness of publicity campaigns via customer surveys and conversion of enquiries into enrolments in order to ascertain 'return on investment'. It is a language which clearly transmits a message as to whose cultural attributes are valued.

Unions, staff contracts and changes in employment law

Trade Unions, including the teaching unions have been under attack for some time - (Pietrasik, 1987). For the neo-liberals the 'power' of the unions adversely affects the freedom of the market. In Hayek's (1962) view, trade unions indirectly lead to economic inflation because where they seek to raise members' wages above the level that would establish itself under a free market, they cause unemployment and if governments respond to this by increasing the supply of money to maintain the level of demand, then this results in an artificial boom and higher inflation. A reduction in the power of the unions can therefore be seen as an important move to

keep inflation under control. Trade unions are also seen to interfere with management's rights to manage and to deter investment. For neo-conservatives they are a threat to the authority of the state and challenge the established social order.

The 1992 FHE Act, by removing colleges from LEA control, cleared the way for local agreements on lecturers pay and conditions of service and the end to 'Silver Book' national agreements (11). Colleges were told that the level of their funding was dependant on the majority of academic staff moving to new locally negotiated and agreed contracts of service and away from the national 'Silver Book' conditions. However, despite continuous attempts to reach agreement at a local level between college managers and unions and at national level with the involvement of the Colleges Employers' Forum (CEF) to resolve the issues of new lecturer contracts, four years after incorporation there were still colleges without an agreement or with staff working a mixture of old and new contracts. In November 1996 college lecturers were set to strike in fifty colleges over a 2.4% pay award and refusal of management to pay anything to staff sticking to old local authority conditions of service, (TES, 1996).

The House of Lords ruling on the rights of part-time workers has added another dimension to discussions on conditions of service and created additional problems for college managers. Traditionally there had always been a proportion of part-time staff, often women, employed in the sector, because flexibility could be achieved through the employment of part-time, hourly paid staff. At the very time that more flexibility was needed, with individual student choice replacing long standing employer day release arrangements, part-time staff acquired additional employment rights. Senior staff have had to calculate the costs of staff salaries against the income that might be generated through the funding methodology which, as I shall discuss in more detail later, is a major issue because the failure to generate target units could result in a funding claw back, financial deficit, redundancy costs and possible insolvency.

Each FE institution is resolving the issue of staff contracts and conditions differently yet the outcome across the sector is that it is not only the work patterns and so called 'restrictive practices' of lecturers that have been changed, their autonomy and professional status has also been challenged. Chown (1996) has suggested that the introduction of competence based qualifications (NVQs) for teacher training and staff development, is an attempt at the reconceptualisation of teaching and learning as technical procedures and of teachers as technicians rather than professionals. Ecclestone (1996) has similarly argued that NVQs

incorporate the 'technology' of reflective practice into a restrictive and prescriptive framework of learning and assessment which divorces values from techniques and methods. The power and status of teachers is thus being eroded and through the insertion of market ideology into education there is a pressure to change the central relationship between teacher and student to customer and service deliverer.

Outcomes

What clearly emerges from my consideration of the effect of Conservative education policy on the further education sector, is a picture of tensions and contradictions. There is a central contradiction between the strengthening of the state in an attempt to control the direction of change and the theory of the free market and consumer choice. The neo-liberal influence on policy has resulted in the construction of a model, which through the mechanism of the market, reinforces central control whilst declaring devolved decision making and consumer choice (Gamble, 1994). 'New Labour' show no signs of replacing this model (Geoff Whitty, lecture at University of Oxford, 24th February, 1998).

The 1992 Education Act has given adults the statutory right to receive education, but only according to criteria laid down by the government, tightly linked to vocational purpose. There has been a failure to acknowledge the wider contribution that learning makes to a democratic society, and indeed to the educational achievement of future generations. As a result, I believe that despite the general increase in participation, access and progression routes have been weakened for those sectors of the community that the government have said they wish to encourage into education and employment, including women, the long term unemployed and low skilled. All this has been supported by the findings of the Kennedy committee (FEFC, 1997).

Whilst the Government talks of the need to increase participation in HE and FE and to achieve parity of esteem that will erode the academic-vocational divide, there is no recognition of the structures which maintain inequalities relating to gender and 'race' and in particular the relationship between what is viewed as high status knowledge and class formation. As I shall consider later, participation is seen as a marketing issue, there has been no recognition of the outreach work (and money) necessary to bring traditional non-participants and the long term

unemployed back into education. The glossification and slick marketing of further education and the desire of colleges to attract skilled learners who can access learning and succeed within prescribed time scales, makes accessing provision more threatening for some sectors of the community, at a time when other opportunities for local authority adult learning are reducing, or rising in price. Student completion of courses has become a major issue for colleges, primarily because student retention has been linked to funding, rather than because there is concern that individuals may have a negative experience of returning to education or that there are extrinsic issues that make it difficult to cope with becoming a student.

There is a tension between policies which encourage women to learn new skills, gain qualifications and contribute to the growth of the economy and those which seek to push women back into the home to service indirectly the economy and take responsibility for the care of children, elderly and sick relatives and support the physical, emotional and moral health of their families - to privately carry the burden of government under funding of public services.

So despite the importance laid on customer choice it is becoming clear that it is not the concerns and interests of students that is to be privileged but that of employers and the economic needs of the state. In what follows I shall describe the experience of mature women students returning to education and argue that by failing to link its education policies to its other policies and social purposes the government is in effect failing in its own project of making individuals less dependent on the state. (I shall also reveal the ways in which women are seeking to use the educational offer for their own purposes and are actively seeking to make a future for themselves and their families.)

NOTES

1. When HE expansion exceeded government expectations student numbers were capped in 1993.
2. Access courses, modularisation Flexible Open Learning (FOL), Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Credit Accumulation and Transfer schemes (CATs)
3. Early indications from the Dearing Inquiry suggest that HE is likely to become more local, flexible and vocational with FE colleges providing a higher volume of modular 'advanced FE' and HE programmes. FE colleges offering HE courses having been found to offer good quality at less cost than other HE programmes. (TES 29.11.96 pg. 22).
4. At the time of writing, 300 of the 450 colleges in the sector were believed to have financial deficits (TES and THES 23.3.96.) The TES reported that 59 colleges were said to have current liabilities more than their assets and 'if they were in the private sector, then, technically they would be insolvent' (TES 29.11.96 pg. 23).

5. Any institutions or services providing courses as defined in the Act but not themselves incorporated, were able to apply to their schedule 2 programmes funded by the FEFC via an incorporated institution. A number of colleges have specifically sought franchise arrangements to enhance their student numbers.
6. The Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) is a joint initiative between Trades Unions and Ford UK to provide workplace education. The company sponsors employees in their studies which are seen as personal development rather than vocation.
7. The Lifetime Learning Target stipulates that by the year 2000, 70% of all firms employing 200 or more employees and 35% of those employing 50 or more should be recognised as Investors in People. the position in 1995 was that only 8% of the larger and 5% of the smaller organisations had achieved the standard. (DFEE 1995:8).
8. European law and the House of Lords ruling gave part-time workers the same rights as full time workers.
9. There is still an element of historical funding left in the way that colleges are funded - although the number of units a college achieves is based on performance, the unit itself (ALF) has a historical basis so two colleges in the same student catchment area, achieving the same number of units may actually receive different sums of money based on history rather than achievement at this time a date for 'convergence has still not been agreed
10. At the time of writing, discussions on the revised system for FEFC inspection indicate that some form of local quality councils organised and paid for by the colleges themselves may replace some inspection activities and so reduce central costs. The TES reported that the FEFC has been told by government that it must reduce running costs by 5% over three years (TES 22.11.96 pg. 28).
11. The Silver Book contains details of national agreements between employers and teacher's unions on pay and conditions of service

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

From the personal to the political?

Although I have substantial professional experience as a lecturer and advisory teacher in Local Authority adult education and the 'old FE' and as a manager in the 'new' FE, it is perhaps the experiences that I have had combining the demands of employment, marriage, motherhood and study that have given rise to this particular project. In 1983 on the first day of the Diploma Course in Adult and Continuing Education I discovered that I was pregnant. My situation was further complicated by the fact that I had resigned my post in a college in order to continue as an advisory teacher for an additional year. As the main earner in the family I was faced with some difficult choices. By the end of the course I had an acting head of department post in an Adult Education Institute, a toddler and another baby on the way. I had also had the opportunity to study the history and practice of adult education and had begun to develop research and analytical skills. Perhaps most importantly in the context of this study, I had begun to think deeply about the position of women in society and develop a feminist perspective.

In the years that followed I have progressed my career, balancing the demands of being a senior full time manager in further education with those of being a student and a mother. Deeper engagement with social and political issues at local and national level have not made my personal and professional choices any easier, for example dealing with the dilemmas I have faced as a working mother. The possibilities that education offers women for personal and social change remain important to me.

The first section of this thesis has set the context for the main study which follows. In the first chapter I have identified some of the discursive concerns related to educational provision for women, which have persisted over time. In the second, I have described the current context in which learning opportunities for adults are offered.

In this chapter I shall describe and give the rationale for my choice of qualitative research methods and discuss some of the practical, theoretical and ethical problems and my response to them. I shall

seek to make visible the ways in which my personal and professional experience, values and concerns have acted as a filter for the collection and presentation of data. Finally I shall identify the limits of the study and consider the generalisability of the data.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction - research 'story'

This study is the 'story' of fourteen mature women students studying in an inner city further education college. It is a 'snap-shot' in time which reveals something of their individual histories and hidden lives and 'gives voice' to their concerns and aspirations for themselves and their families, as they manage the demands of work, home and study. My concern was also to reveal the discourses generated over time which limit the choices and opportunities available to women and which are embedded in the education system and normalising notions of the family. My purpose was also to produce a critique of recent education policy in order to give policy makers (as interpreters of central policy), insights and options.

Although the research was undertaken in one college, this is in not a classic ethnographic case study. As I have already stated in the introduction to this thesis, my main concern was to use primary evidence to provide clear illustrations of the ways in which government policies, impact on the lives of ordinary women in ways which might not have been anticipated. In using this primary evidence, my intention has been to achieve grounded veracity and adequacy which does not rely on detailed contextual description (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In depth investigation and analysis is privileged over description and exhaustive large scale data collection.

Whilst I formulated my research question and planned my fieldwork, I read texts concerned with ethical and methodological issues. The research methods employed in this study were not pre-determined, they were deployed gradually through my engagement with the research problem and as my understanding of it and my own relationship to it, developed. The methods I selected reflect my early interest in grounded theory, 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:2). Glaser and Strauss (1967) have suggested that,

‘[...] in discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept. The evidence may not necessarily be accurate beyond a doubt (nor is it even in studies concerned only with accuracy), but the concept is undoubtedly a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:23)

They go on to say that the concept may change even though the facts do not change, emphasising the need for the researcher to consider all theoretical explanations as provisional. However, this ‘groundedness’ is in a context where the researcher’s own personal values and interests also play a part.

Theoretical positioning

I will now describe the role of theory in this study and the tensions which I have sought to resolve in reaching a theoretical position. I use theory as a tool to aid analysis and to dig below the surface of what is presented as evidence. Its role is to help explain and validate experience but I also wish to use experience to challenge existing theory and contribute to the formation of new theories and knowledge.

Research is a learning process and takes place over time. My understanding of the data, my own position as a social actor and the political contexts continued to develop throughout the project. As a result, my theoretical position shifted and became more focused over time.

I started from a Symbolic Interactionist position which drew on the work of Burgess (1985) and Blumer (1986). Blumer has explained symbolic interaction as follows:

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his [sic] world - physical objects, such as chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions such as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters on his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellow. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1986:2).

I attempted to apply a conceptual scheme which recognised and respected that individual ‘actors’ behaviour is based on the meanings that things in the external world have for them, based on their

previous experience and that they are constantly modifying their ideas through an interpretative process and seeking to create meanings through their interaction with others. As time progressed, it became clear that there were problems with using this approach to explain the data at a deeper level, in particular the complexity of differential positioning in relation to power structures. For this reason I incorporated a specific interpretation of discourse theory as a key analytical tool (see chapter 1).

My final position owes much to aspects of post-structuralist theorisation and in particular the work of Michel Foucault (1974, 1977). This position allowed me to examine the ways in which notions of common sense and rationality are expressed by the dominant culture through culturally specific ideas set in public policy. I was also able to reveal the power of dominant discourses to 'silence' or marginalise alternative discourses but also argue that deconstruction of powerful discourses is possible by revealing contradictions, diversity and alternative perspectives and that this has the potential to subvert discourses which may empower oppressed groups.

Whilst I do not believe that the modernist quest for 'grand narratives' or overarching theories offers adequate explanation and ways forward in terms of what I wanted to achieve, I share Thompson's concerns that postmodernist approaches, even when adopted by feminists, are often,

'far from accessible to the general feminist reader. And in their most extreme expression come with a denial of any form of material reality' (Thompson, 1995:131).

I have sought to achieve a theoretical approach grounded in the experiences of ordinary women and capable of creating 'really useful knowledge',

'The kind of knowledge that supports women, in the company of others, in the business of transforming their lives. The kind of knowledge that shifts the emphasis from victims to survivors. From customers to activists. From impotence to creative anger. From those who desist to those who resist. The kind of knowledge that assists women in various and real sites of struggle, including those which are personal and private, to confront the everyday experiences of inequalities and power relations which help sustain the logic and authority of the status quo. In other words, to help women bring about change' (Thompson, 1995:131).

I have therefore attempted to take an approach which recognises power relations and the inter-relationship between the material and cultural dimensions of social life. It is here that I found the work of Bourdieu (1985 and 1990) helpful.

Through the concept of 'habitus' Bourdieu has attempted to overcome the dualism between agency and structure and thereby adds an important analytical tool in relation to thinking about 'difference' and social class in particular. 'Habitus' has been developed as a concept by Bourdieu to demonstrate how an individual is placed within the social world but also to demonstrate the way in which the key aspects of culture are embodied within an individual, evident in the way in which they are disposed to think, feel and behave.

'The habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature' (Bourdieu, 1990:63)

Bourdieu's theorisation shifts class from a simple categorisation based on economic or social status to a complex web of relationships between and within classes. 'Habitus' provides a conceptual tool for recognising differences between individuals within the same cultural group and emphasises the inequalities which permeate those differences. Personal history and family background is constitutive of 'habitus' and links to the history of the social group of which individuals are members. It is for this reason that my study of women students extends beyond the classroom, to consider differential access to resources and the ways in which lack of money, good accommodation and childcare and unsupportive or abusive relationships affects each woman's positioning and the 'choices' she makes. Within Bourdieu's work, he sees power as distributed in the form of 'capitals' including cultural, economic, symbolic and social. Cultural capital is a helpful device for linking class to culture and was a tool I used for considering the positions and actions of women in relation to their return to education.

Thus, in this study which is a policy analysis, illuminated by the experiences of women students who reveal the silencing of gendered issues and a lack of recognition of the different ways in which women live their lives, I have draw on several theories to aid my collection of data and analysis. Symbolic interactionism (Burgess, 1984 and 1985; Blumer, 1986) guided my initial approach to data collection. As my research progressed, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the work of Foucault (1977) concerning discourse and Bourdieu concerning 'habitus', 'field' and 'capitals' (1985 and 1990) became key conceptual tools.

Researching women and theorising women

This research was carried out and written up over a period of four and a half years. During this period my ideas about feminism, theory and research changed and continue to change. I therefore do

not claim that any specific feminist viewpoint or theory underpinned my work throughout, yet a number of concerns voiced by feminists informed my approach.

Feminist researchers including McRobbie (1982), Maynard and Purvis (1994) have argued the importance of locating themselves within their research. Kelly (1988) has suggested that the presence of the researcher and her purposes within her work are a distinctive feature of feminist research:

‘The questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work ‘ (Kelly, 1988:6)

More generally the need for reflexivity and awareness of the effect of the researcher’s own history and social positioning has also been discussed in relation to the research process, with the need for constant self awareness and reflexivity emphasised (Ball, 1990a; Opie, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993). It is therefore important that I place myself within the study so that judgements can be made about the status of the findings. I have already touched briefly on the autobiographical aspects of this research and declared my position as a feminist, revealing that part of my project is to contribute to a feminist epistemology and to challenge patriarchal relations. As a feminist involved in research I am therefore part of the continuous process of discovery and interpretation and also active in attempting to bring about change - the creation of ‘really useful knowledge’. This research is by me and of me. Ball (1990a:167) has pointed out that another researcher would gain different data and insights if he or she did the fieldwork; he has also argued that the differences between analysis would be small rather than large and,

‘[...]would be matters of emphasis and orientation, rather than in the story to be told. The complexity and the “becomingness” of social life belies the possibility of a single exhaustive or definitive account.’ (Ball, 1990a:167)

Dealing with differences and commonalties between women in the context of policy research

My starting point is a belief that women and men have different and unequal life chances and that social structures support male domination. Although there are differences between women, which need to be recognised and,

‘the specifics of subjugation will certainly differ in particular times, places and circumstances, nevertheless the result is always to position women in relationships of subordination to men’ (Stanley and Wise, 1993:210)

As a result, there are common areas of experience which link their situations together and I believed that this was worthy of study. However privileging gender above other experiences such as class and 'race' carries the danger of slipping into an essentialist position which places women's experience as unitary. My concern was to recognise the differences between the women in my study but not to end up with a fragmentation which weakened the argument for educational policy linked to social policy, which recognises the combined needs of women, particularly mothers. How might differences between women therefore be addressed within research of this kind?

Maynard (1994a) suggests in relation to race and gender, that the differences between women have been conceptualised in two ways within the work of Western feminists. In summary, the first approach is centred on diversity of experience, drawing on the traditions of feminism and radical education. This approach recognises that a term such as 'black' may encompass other differences of class, age, religion, sexuality and disability. However the privileging of experience has been seen as problematic (Fuss, 1989; Zukas, 1998) as it may 'hide assumptions about its taken for granted authority' (Zukas, 1998:34). Maynard suggest that the second way of considering differences is informed by postmodernism where deconstruction is privileged as the method by which the post-modern world can be analysed. She argues that, whilst these two perspectives may be seen to be rooted in oppositional philosophies, they have commonalities which challenge the 'grand theory' approach and allow for new formations and alliances.

In finding my own way forward, I have attempted to recognise the diversities of women's experiences and relate them to the particular discursive formations which have historically affected specific groups, whilst recognising the oppressive nature of patriarchal relations that affects them all. However in doing this I have been aware of problems that have been identified when dealing with difference which I have sought to take into consideration within my study. I must admit to finding it particularly difficult to write about black and working class women. I am acutely aware of the variety of their individual experiences and how different they have been from my own. I have read the critiques of the work of some early 'second wave' white, middle-class feminists who subsumed the specific experience of black women into their own. I am aware of the criticisms made of white, privileged, women researchers who have been accused of mis-representing the actual experiences of people different from themselves, 'the other' and therefore only producing partial knowledge with the power to name and define held by the white researcher (including Amos and Parmar, 1984; hooks, 1984; Spelman, 1988). Yet Elliott (1998) has argued that if the range of black women's experiences are ignored by white women this results in even more partial knowledge. The

mutual recognition of shared concerns and feelings between myself and some of the women I interviewed, particularly regarding expectations of us because of motherhood, was an important factor that I did not want to lose.

If 'labelling' other people's experiences is problematic, fracturing into individual experiences and a multiplicity of identities through a postmodernist approach to 'difference' produces its own problems - how can generalisations about social structures be made? Maynard has argued,

'The deconstruction of categories such as race and gender may make visible the contradictions, mystifications, silences and hidden possibilities of which they are made up. But this is not the same thing as destroying or transcending - the categories themselves, which clearly play significant roles in how the social world is organised on a global scale' (Maynard, 1994a:19).

Whilst identifying differences between women, I would wish to avoid a fracturing which diminishes the possibility of empowerment and political agency which comes from a recognition of women's shared experiences and in particular their oppression by patriarchal relations. However, this is also fraught with dangers because of the inter-relationship of differences, for example white-working class and middle-class women experience patriarchal relationships differently and their class experiences also place them in differential power relationships with each other. This can be further fractured by ethnicity, able-bodiedness, sexuality and so on. So, while identifying differences can result in some groups becoming 'the other', 'outsiders', so finding commonalities can result in 'the accumulation of oppressed identities' (Maynard, 1994a:19).

Within the study, I considered adding to quotations from interviews, information about each woman's class or 'race' as well as her 'name', but rejected this as it seemed over simplistic because terms such as 'black' do not constitute coherent categories in themselves and could have masked rather than reveal the individual situations of my respondents. For instance, Geraldine is white working-class, but as an Irish woman has experienced oppression as a member of a minority ethnic group. Lizzie was brought up in a middle-class, intellectual, environment but has few formal qualifications and is a lone parent, living on state benefits with six mixed-race children. Key personal information is provided in Figure 2 and appendix I, as I shall presently discuss.

In reaching my theoretical view and choosing my research methods I was mindful of my main project, to reveal the effect of Government policies, and whilst, I would wish to acknowledge differences between women, it was my concern not to dilute key messages to policy makers and

implementers about 'gender blindness' in their practices which supports male interests, through an implied 'neutrality' (Robertson, 1992).

ACCESS TO THE FIELD AND ISSUES OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND STATUS

Issues related to researching in my own college

When I started this project I was working full time in a further education college and had three young children at primary school. I needed to be pragmatic about what I could achieve in the time available to me. My decision to research within the college where I am employed gave me easy entry to the field and flexibility. It did not guarantee me 'access' which, as other researchers have pointed out, has to be 'won'. (King, 1984; Ball, 1990a) Researching in my own place of work also raised ethical issues in relation to my status, particularly as regards confidentiality of data and the power relationship with interviewees who were staff and students.

Before I commenced any fieldwork, I wrote a formal letter to the Principal requesting his permission to research within the college and laying down ground rules in terms of my access to data held on the central computer, use of college resources for research purposes (surveys, interviewing time, secretarial time, photocopying) and setting out my own conditions on confidentiality for individual staff and the college as a whole. This was especially important as I have an 'intellectual property' clause in my contract. I came to an agreement with the Principal that data in an aggregated form would be made available to the college in order to improve services to students, but no access would be given to interview transcripts. I would not disclose which staff or students I had interviewed or any other information through which individuals might be identified, even if this could have been used as part of positive marketing. The issues related to my status within the organisation were more difficult to address as I shall discuss in the section on interviewing which follows.

A particular concern I had was to protect confidentiality for respondents who held unique, specialist positions within the college, such as college counsellor or welfare adviser. Their views were important because of their particular perspective. To detach the evidence from the source diminished its power, yet a change of name would not have protected identity. I believe I have found

other means by which to present the experiences of these special informants, without distorting the data, or weakening their impact. The reader will have to take this on trust.

Working as a manager in a multi-site college with 15,000 students meant that I seldom came in contact with the students I interviewed. I had no line management responsibility for their courses. No revelations that students made were ever passed by me to tutors; nor questions asked of tutors which could have hinted at the content of specific interviews. Some data was fed back to staff in a non-attributable and generalised form as part of data triangulation. Yet, I had anxieties about confidentiality especially when I discovered that interviewees were revealing that they had taken part in my research. I found Plummer's (1983) discussion of this difficult ethical dilemma helpful in relation to how far the researcher can be responsible for the conduct of others. Plummer stressed the duty that the researcher has to protect the researched by striving for confidentiality of personal information. However, he also acknowledged that if an interviewee wishes to declare his or her involvement in the research project to others, then it is beyond the power of the researcher to prevent this.

As far as my respondents were concerned I was not made aware of any illegal or difficult moral situations such as those described by Adler and Adler (1993) which caused me to edit or alter my data. Students occasionally admitted to 'working off the books' which is technically benefits fraud. I left this data in, but have ensured that the individuals can not be identified. I hope that my contextualisation of this practice in the text justifies this decision. One member of staff told me about lying to an official body in order to help a student in a desperate emotional and financial situation. She and I privileged the research context and this is where that disclosure has remained. I cite it as an example of the degree to which I believe I was able to build trust within what was potentially a difficult situation of interviewing junior colleagues.

As a manager and an academic researcher, I had 'insider knowledge'. This was helpful in terms of having access to current data but also caused problems for me because of the delay between personal experience and comment appearing in the literature. I found that as a manager/researcher I needed to operate on several different levels simultaneously. Whilst the 'manager' was working at a strategic or operational level, the 'researcher' was attempting to analyse what was happening and why at a deeper theoretical level. This of course arguably makes for a better manager. It is extremely difficult to analyse what is happening while in the middle of it and coping with the human

aspects of managing change. Sometimes developments are presented with a political 'spin' and it takes a little time to penetrate the real thrust and probable impact on colleges and students.

Writing aids my analysis and helps me to sort out what is happening. However I have to be aware of the writing styles required by different roles of researcher and manager. A management report requires a different level of presentation of material from an academic paper. Consequently I often needed to slip from one writing style to another whilst considering the same issues.

Thus much of what I wrote about in the early stages of my research, which reflected personal concerns and concerns of those in the sector, had not yet appeared in the literature, nor often in the educational press. Writing up this study took place over a period of time, with a changing external world when I was developing my personal understanding and analysis of meaning. Perhaps the most difficult decision was when to stop making revisions.

My professional involvement on the national, as well as the local education scene, placed me in a position to influence as well as interpret (and sometime subvert) policy. This usually means interpreting information as it comes through and trying to 'second guess' changes in order to develop appropriate responses and gain an advantage over other colleges. This requires that I read the educational press, talk to colleagues, attend conferences and talk to politicians and members of national education committees. These latter activities also afford an opportunity to influence policy as does making responses to government and FEFC consultation documents; e.g. evidence to the Kennedy committee.

I am a committed adult educator and, as a manager, I have developed a feminist praxis which places the learning needs of students at the centre. I was always clear that my research data would be used by me to improve opportunities for students and my management position gave me some power to do this (1). Apart from my research, my management style is to be accessible and have regular conversations with students, staff and other managers. I believe that this has enabled me to see the problems faced by students and college staff and that the discussion of strategic, operational and personal issues is an important contribution to educational research.

I recognise that as a white, middle class, well educated senior manager in an FE college I am in a powerful position relative to the majority of staff and students. Yet as a woman in that position, unlike my male colleagues, I have to operate in an environment which privileges male experience

and values, where I have to consistently challenge the principles which underpin decisions about strategic and operational matters and deal with social pressures which make me feel responsible for the happiness and well-being of others. It is this position, along with my personal history, which informs my analysis.

Perhaps the major tension I felt is to be found in what senior colleagues believed I was researching and the resulting study. There are three reasons why this tension may have arisen. Firstly, perhaps their desire for my research to have a tangible outcome in the college resulted in a projection of what they wanted it to be about and some inability to hear, or understand what I said I was doing. Secondly, I felt reticent to voice too often, my concerns about some policies and practice and explicitly link this to research with individuals, in case this led to a breach of confidentiality. Finally, there was an element of professional self-preservation in discussing my research in a setting where significant data frequently meant large quantitative samples and not the “anecdotal comments from a few women” (field notes). In recent years, colleges have invested in quantitative market research and used data provided by college computerised management information systems and sector wide statistics from the FEFC to inform strategic planning. Although the reliability of this data has frequently been queried by college staff and FEFC inspectors, this form of research is often privileged above smaller scale qualitative work.

The situation that developed was that I benefited from a contribution to my registration fees and freedom to research within the organisation according to the ethical arrangement I insisted on to protect respondents. In return for their support, the college gained aspects of my research which were valuable in terms of ‘the business’, such as information which could help improve retention rates or results and therefore of potential financial worth, or valuable in terms of the positive publicity for the college which resulted from the growing number of articles I had published and conferences which I was invited to attend. ‘Self censorship’ prior to the completion of this study therefore took the form of selected aspects presented according to the interest of the audience, rather than a wilful act of omission. In terms of feminist praxis my reflexivity and the presentation of findings have, as Glucksmann (1994) has identified,

‘[...] included an appreciation of the limits of what could possibly be achieved in the particular political (micro and macro*) context of the time. (Glucksmann, 1994:150) *my brackets.

Whilst a large number of colleagues have been supportive and interested on a personal level, and feminist staff and students on a political level, my research has had limited interest at the management level.

PREPARATORY WORK IN THE FIELD

Early research and survey data

My research interest concerned the ways in which family, employment and study interacted together to affect the choices adult students made about their continuing education. Student retention had become a major issue for FE colleges, with the recruitment and continuing attendance of students a factor in the way FE was funded by the Government, as I shall discuss in chapter 6. My college required that information was collected as to why students left courses early. However as I began to look at the data available, the 'official' quantitative data did not fit with what I knew about students after twenty years experience as a lecturer. The data which was being collected by numerous colleges at this time was usually the result of a letter or telephone call from a member of staff, often the lecturer, to the students who had left, or was based on anecdotal information from other students. Why would students tell these people their reasons for leaving, especially when these might be related to their feelings about the individual contacting them or to personal matters they did not want to discuss?

I decided to do a survey (2) using an anonymous questionnaire which asked students, who were currently attending courses, about any previous instances when they had left a course early. This approach was designed to avoid the embarrassment students might feel about discussing current problems and which, mediated by time, might get nearer to the 'real' reasons for non completion of courses. It also focused on factors which affected students' decisions to complete their courses not only their reasons for leaving. This was because my experience as a lecturer and manager suggested that it was not always the students with the greatest external pressures who left early.

Although these early findings (see appendix II) do not figure in any significant way in the study that follows, they were important because they helped me to begin to focus my research question and they gave me indications as to the type of research methods that would be needed if I was to get nearer to the factors which influenced student behaviour. The survey therefore helped me to

formulate the initial areas of questioning which I used for my in-depth interviews. I also used this early data to triangulate findings from the in-depth interviews which followed.

The survey was undertaken in March 1995 when students were well into their courses and were in a position to reflect on their experiences of returning to college. The sample covered male and female students across the age range represented in the college, who were studying on part time (classed as courses of under 6 hrs per week) and full time courses (classed as courses of 7 hrs and above) (3). A total of 297 questionnaires (201 part-time and 96 full time, reflecting the ratio of full time to part time students enrolled) were sent to 99 courses (67 part time and 32 full time). Within each course three students were asked to complete a form. The 99 courses were spread across all faculties and included day and evening courses on five college sites. 149 questionnaires were completed and returned (50.2% return rate).

25% of individuals (5% male and 20% female) studying on a wide range of courses and modes of study stated that they had 'dropped out' of previous courses. Reasons included external factors such as financial problems (four people, 6%), poor health (four people, 6%), work pressures and general lack of time to attend college or do homework (seven people, 10.5%). Some indicated that a lack of initial advice and guidance had resulted in enrolment on an inappropriate learning programme - two transferred to another course, two had taken on too many courses and four believed they were currently on the wrong course. There were also indications that poor teaching had resulted in some students not feeling valued (two people, 3%) or stimulated (two people, 3%) and lacking a sense of their own progress (three people, 5%). Few had discussed their reasons for leaving with college staff.

14% of students stated that they had considered leaving their current course. (A number of additional students made comments as to why they had decided to continue). Factors which motivated students to continue with their studies included the achievement of qualifications (eight people, 12%) and the opportunity to go on to higher education (six people, 9%) or progress their careers (two people, 3%). Both men and women stated the importance they attached to enjoying learning (eight people, 12%). The importance of being part of a group (three people, 5%) and receiving encouragement from staff (eight people, 12%) and fellow students (one person) was also a motivating factor, particularly for women students. Six students (9%) also made explicit reference to their determination to succeed.

The additional comments which individuals wrote on their forms demonstrated complexity, with several interacting factors working together to influence their feelings about themselves as learners and consequently the actions they took. This complexity was not going to be revealed by a 'tick box' approach to data gathering. Some of the individuals had been deeply affected by earlier educational experiences and used the anonymous questionnaire to reveal some of these feelings. It became clear to me that in order to gather data which would extend the information I had already obtained, I would need to interview students. Interviewing was going to need great sensitivity if it was to allow students to reveal their often deeply painful experiences related to education and the personal struggles involved in becoming adult students.

Interviewing staff

Marina	Lecturer - counselling
Samantha	Lecturer - mathematics/basic education
Dawn	Lecturer - child care
Patricia	Advice and guidance team
Hester	Lecturer - art and design
Onica	Lecturer - basic education
Collette	Lecturer - food studies
Louise	Advice and guidance team

Figure 1. Analysis of Staff Sample

Parallel with the student survey, I carried out eight in-depth interviews with staff (see figure 1.) and had numerous informal discussions with others. My aim was to gain a general insight into the current issues affecting students' ability to cope with returning to college in order to contextualise the data from the individual student interviews. The staff were chosen primarily because of their roles within the college. I wanted to have the perceptions of staff who gave potential students initial advice and guidance about returning to college and of those who selected them using interview or test. I was also interested in talking to people who had a pastoral role within the college as personal tutors or independent members of the student services team, responsible for welfare advice and counselling. In particular I sought out individuals who had been identified as 'key tutors' - those significant others whose attitudes and actions had, according to students, had a significant impact on their ability to cope with their studies and make a life-change. In addition I selected some experienced lecturers with a spread of subject expertise which reflected the college FE curriculum this included art and design, hairdressing, food studies, childcare, social studies and basic education (the College does not offer courses in science, construction or engineering).

The result of the choices I made about what type of experience I wanted the staff to have was that all the staff that I interviewed were women. There are no men in the Student Services Unit and overall 73% of the full time and fractional lecturing staff are women (4). Not only are many of the curriculum areas in traditional female occupations, but also the pastoral 'caring' aspect of the work led to a gender bias. During our discussions, it emerged that the majority of the staff whom I interviewed had also been mature students and several had worked on a part-time basis whilst their own children were young. They had therefore used education to make life-changes and develop their own careers (5). I decided not to interview a male lecturer, although I did talk informally to several during the course of my fieldwork.

What did these members of staff think were the key issues affecting students' ability to complete their courses successfully? How far was their interpretation of their students' problems at variance with, or supportive of, the student view? My conversations with staff helped me to see if emerging student interview findings were unusual and also identify any tensions that front-line staff were experiencing when interpreting policy. Discussions with staff also helped me to understand how far their attitudes might be part of some students' disaffection with college and to identify areas of need for staff training and strategies to improve the student experience of returning to education. As a college manager I became involved in further research in this area. However, it was the students' experiences that I was privileging in this study and I have therefore limited discussion of these findings here.

I limited the number of in-depth, taped interview with staff to eight as I believe that this was sufficient to help me refine my research question, give insights into the meanings of student data and validate it. For example, student feedback suggested that personal contact from their lecturers when they were absent was appreciated as a personal concern, and motivated students to return. Discussion about this with Samantha confirmed that this was her experience as a lecturer but that 'caring' was not enough to help some of her students, who tended to be poor white working class or minority ethnic and refugees, to overcome the deeper issues which made it difficult for them to return to study and that, although they came back for a few classes, they often dropped out in the end:

'They came back because of the interest shown, but what I probably didn't do was get to the real problem and even if I had done, there was probably nothing that I could have done' (Samantha, interview).

This type of discussion confirmed to me the importance of my research extending beyond the college experience as well as a consideration of 'habitus'. It also contributed to the development of an exploratory code note about 'key tutors' and the significance of relationships between staff and students and the role this played in supporting life-change.

I gained input from a larger number and wider range of staff (including men) via informal exchanges and a seminar (16th February, 1995) which I held to discuss the early data which arose from the student survey. This seminar which was taped and transcribed (with the prior permission of participants) helped me to identify assumptions held by myself and other professionals in relation to adult students' abilities to cope with returning to study and linked issues concerning implementation of education policy in FE.

It is important to recognise the differential power in the research relationship and the particular problems that this posed for me because I was carrying out the research in my own college. The ethical concerns of interviewing staff and the way I sought to deal with them were very similar to those encountered when interviewing students. As the students are the central focus of this study I shall detail my interview methodology in the section which follows. However, I shall now briefly discuss some staff specific issues.

I was careful to write to each person to ask if they were willing to be interviewed and to give them information about my research interests, examples of questions and strategy to protect confidentiality. This I think was helpful in separating *me* as senior manager from *me* as researcher in terms of the relationships and disclosure in interviews. This has been confirmed in subsequent conversations with staff. For example, a year after one interview I mentioned my interest in 'researcher effect' to a lecturer (Samantha). She told me that she had initially wondered how she would react to talking to me as I am a senior manager. She said she thought the way the interview had been set up had helped her to be clear of the ground rules and therefore relaxed and that during the interview she had thought how natural and comfortable it felt. She suggested that during the interview my management role was less important than the fact that we were two women with some shared history who were trying to make meanings out of our experiences.

My job gave me easy access to people and information and my research could be seen as a natural extension of my normal activities - interviewing students, talking to staff about quality of services and ways to improve systems. Yet I wanted to give myself space between my different roles - to be

critical of college policy and practice which in my management role I should have been supporting in conversations with junior colleagues. Ball (1990a) has discussed the role of what he calls *reflexivity* in relation to the personas used by a researcher in the field. He makes the point that it may be necessary to project different sides of oneself to take on particular roles in order to collect data and that this awareness of self and reaction of the actors should be a constant part of the analysis in the field and inform decisions about future action.

It is not only the decisions that we make about what and how much of ourselves we expose to other people; they will also be selective about what they say and may project other qualities onto us because of their own psychology and experience and in a college this will also be coloured by micro-politics (Hoyle, 1982). I have a long association with the College and its predecessor institutions and my commitment to certain educational principles and my past actions have built my reputation - for good or ill and I suspect that no amount of projection would have altered the way some staff saw me.

My experience was that staff were pleased that a senior manager was interested in their work, particularly when it focused on teaching and learning and not on units of funding, new conditions of service, efficiency savings and all the other management obsessions. As Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) have pointed out, a gap has been developing between management and service delivery in education; college managers have come to be seen as distant policy makers who have forgotten that the real business of the organisation is teaching and learning. Staff were also pleased to be able to talk to me about student issues that had been worrying them - perhaps in the hope that I could offer some solutions or that our discussions might influence policy making.

My track record as an adult educator, involvement in my own learning project, and status as a working mother were important aspects in my interview relationship with staff. Our own feelings and life experiences were often shared in these initial interviews when the subject of the conversation was the need for women to balance all the demands made on them by the different parts of their lives, their aspirations and concern for their children and the need for personal space and self determination. A deep empathy was expressed and personal information was often exchanged. Staff were prepared to disclose 'dangerous information' in terms of attitudes to College policies and systems - even to the point of telling me of action which I should reprimand them for as their senior manager. The interview became a personal and relatively 'safe' space.

In the early interviews with staff I had tended to edit out sections of the transcripts which contained 'personal data' as opposed to 'research data'. I began to include these sections as I came to realise that they were an important part of the interview relationship and part of the way meanings were explored and an attempt to build counter-hegemonic alliances. I suggest that the interviews could be seen as an act of 'resistance' (Thompson, 1995). Certainly they changed my relationship with staff - the experience of exploring women's lives, our own and our students, was important to us all. Not only were my experiences and attitudes affecting the data, but the data was changing me as I shall presently discuss.

Chance meetings in corridors also provided the opportunity to extend these conversations and the relationships. Whilst some extracts of these opportunistic interviews with staff are quoted in the study that follows, their main value was to validate data emerging from the interviews with students.

INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS AND THE RESEARCHER/RESEARCHED RELATIONSHIP

I shall now describe the practical and ethical concerns in relation to the interviews with students, which are the main source of evidence for this study.

The research sample (size characteristics, diversity)

As previously discussed, the subject matter of my research led me to use in-depth interviews as my main method of data collection. From professional experience, I knew that the motivations and pressures on students who attended two hour a week courses, often in the evening, were different from those studying on more substantial day time courses. Students on courses with fewer hours are often looking to maintain or develop a skill such as a language or word-processing or are making the first step back into education. The students on more substantial programmes have often reached a point when they have decided to make a life change and these were the students in whom I was particularly interested. Women with family commitments were more likely to attend during the day when there are less domestic demands on their time. As a result, I selected a small sample of students studying on a range of vocational and academic programmes (see figure 2). Because of my

wish, previously discussed, not to subsume individual differences between women within categories such as 'black' or 'working-class', in general students are referred to in the text by pseudonym only. However, when my analysis relates specifically to class, marital status, 'race', or age this is indicated. In addition to the general information on each respondent in Figure 2, appendix I gives some biographical details. The size of my sample was not pre-determined. I continued to interview until I reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) by which I mean I was not gaining any additional data whereby I could develop the properties of my main codes, as I shall detail in my description of the process of coding and analysis.

The first tranche of students (seven) that I interviewed were identified by course tutors representing a range of different subject areas. No attempt at this stage was made to ensure a spread across age, class or race, although I kept a careful record based on what the students told me about themselves in the interview. I asked students to self define their status in terms of class and race if this had not been mentioned by them in the interview, although in many cases it was. Unlike Edwards (1993) study, all four of the working-class, black and mixed race women chose to describe themselves in terms of race and class (6).

In the second tranche I asked tutors to approach parent-students from minority ethnic groups and some older and younger women to extend the age range. For the later interviews I particularly asked tutors to approach middle class women, although by the nature of daytime FE provision, there are statistically fewer middle class students. This is because middle-class women often have qualifications at the level on offer and may also be employed during the day. They are more often represented in evening classes where they are adding to, or up-grading skills such as languages.

Whilst attempting to gain a diversity within the group, I rejected the idea of controlling the sample by using the college data base to select individuals. No interviewee chose to define herself as disabled or lesbian (although this does not necessarily mean that these social groups were not represented) (4). Any further manipulation such as searching out a disabled student, would I believe have been tokenistic. All research has limitations and although I would agree with Maynard (1994) that one does not always need to include women from a specific group within society to be able to say something about the structures of inequality which limit their choices, the particular concerns of lesbian, disabled and older women are beyond the scope of this study.

The students were generally volunteers and semi-selected themselves. They were interested in the research. They were not reluctant conscripts which I believe was important given the intrusive interview questioning to which they submitted themselves.

The women whose stories are told were studying on FEFC funded courses requiring two or three days attendance per week at college, (although some also attended additional evening or day courses e.g. A level acting, first aid). Their ages ranged between 21 and 'late forties'. The courses that the women were on included visual and performing arts, humanities and traditional areas of female employment including hairdressing and childcare. The college did not offer any courses in science and technology or 'heavy industry' (see figure 2).

Privileging female experience and the absence of a male viewpoint

A number of interrelated reasons led me to confine my research to women students. As I have argued in the first chapter, it has often been men's experience of education that has been taken as the main reference point. In chapter 2, I have described the significant increase in the number of mature students enrolled on FE courses, many of whom are women. The majority of students within the study college are female (consistently 70-75%). However, Edward's (1993) statement, that HE provision has been structured around the needs and lifestyle of the younger male and has supported patriarchal values, could equally be applied to current FE provision. Girls and women are achieving more qualifications than before, often out-performing their male peers. Yet, it is still men who dominate senior positions in most areas of employment. Men continue to earn relatively higher wages than women and are more likely to receive vocational training through employment (CBI, 1994). Despite the 'equal opportunities curriculum', women and men still gravitate towards 'traditional' male and female areas of employment (Rees, 1997).

My research focuses on women and creates knowledge about their experiences and reveals the ways they resist, challenge and subvert male power. In this way men are present within the research as partners, lecturers and policy makers but their individual voices are not heard. Men constituted 23% of the initial survey sample (The same ratio of male/female in the college gender profile). I also interviewed one man in the first group of interviews but as the focus of my research became sharper

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SAMPLE

Ref	Name	Age	Ethnicity*	Class*	Course	Children		Partner#	
S1	Michelle	21	white English	working	Access to humanities and social science	yes			no
S2	Abimbola	40s	black African	-	Psychology	yes		yes	
S3	Lizzie	40s	white English	middle	Ceramics	yes			no
S4	Nicola	24	white English	middle	Acting foundation & A level theatre		no		no
S5	Trish	30	white English	working	Art and design GNVQ (yr. 2)	yes			no
S6	Morag	29	white Scottish	working	Childcare BTEC, NVQ	yes			no
S7	Geraldine	34	white Irish	working	Hairdressing NVQ	yes		yes	
S8	Cleo	31	mixed race	working	Access - sociology and psychology & GCSE maths.	yes			no
S9	Floella	43	black British	working	Access - sociology. psychology & GCSE maths.	yes			no
S10	Petra	45	white English	working	Access - history & Afro/Caribbean studies	yes		yes	
S11	Lorna	26	white Scottish	working	Access - English, Afro/Caribbean studies & anthropology		no	yes	
S12	Marilyn	26	black British	working	Business/management	yes			no
S13	Nadine	23	British West Indian	working	Business/management	yes		yes	
S14	Zandra	39	Haitian	middle	Fashion	yes		yes	

* students self-defined their status in terms of race and class.

male partner/husband living with them at the time of the interview

Figure 2.

I made the decision not to include data from this interview and to limit my research to women's experiences. (Other research examines the experience of male and female mature students including West, 1996).

I considered, but decided not to speak to the women's partners about their attitudes to the women's studies. Only five of the women were living with a male partner at the time of the interview. Apart from the logistics of arranging to speak to the men, this would have altered the relationship I had with the women and I chose not to do this, although I recognise that the attitude of male partners described by the women might have been at variance with the men's own view of their behaviour.

Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest that there is a need in terms of gender to research the powerful as well as the powerless, men as well as women. This becomes more problematic because there are also other power dynamics such as race and class. After careful consideration I decided to confine this study to women's experience, although a similar study on men would be a useful foil.

The researcher/researched relationship - dealing with difference

There are particular ethical issues which need to be considered by women who interview other women. These include the use of strategies such as disclosure of personal information during the interview with the aim of democratising the research process and other actions which seek to empower the researched through increasing their involvement in the production of texts.

Power dynamics are present within the research interview which the researcher needs to recognise in terms of the data that is produced and the way in which it is interpreted. She also needs to be aware of the effect that the research relationship has on her respondents and on herself, not only during the interview but afterwards.

The interview relationship altered with the different women that I interviewed as a result not only of differentials such as age, class and race but also as a result of the psychological state we were in at that time - such as feeling anxious or depressed, (Michelle was seeing a counsellor), optimistic and excited (Trish had just taken her portfolio to the Slade School of Art). Sometimes there was time pressure with students needing to collect their children from school or get to a class. On the two occasions when I interviewed two students together (Petra and Heather, Marilyn and Nadine) the dynamics were different from the individual interviews. The students were often tougher in their

probing of one another but they also gave each other support. My own background in the visual arts may also have resulted in a closer identification at some points with Zandra and Trish than with students on other courses.

The fact that I was a white woman interviewing minority ethnic women was of concern to me. Edwards (1990 and 1993a) has pointed out that black people may feel particularly sensitive about discussing their families with white people and those in authority, resenting the intrusion into the racism free haven of the home. For this reason I discussed my research with a black feminist colleague whom I have known for many years. I shared some of the early data (in a non attributable way) with her and we discussed interpretation and cultural perspectives. She also shared with me her own observations about issues affecting black mothers who returned to education. Edwards (1993a) has described the difficulty she had in getting black mature mother-students to take part in her research. Some were angry and even complained to their course director about being approached. Edwards became 'placed as white, middle-class and oppressive just by the use of an institutional letterhead' (Edwards, 1993a:188). I did not have a problem with black volunteers and in fact had to seek white and other minority ethnic students to redress the balance. However I did not make an 'official' approach to students, but contacted them via their tutors, as already described.

Reay (1996) has pointed out that the experience of belonging to one class or another is underpinned by complex psychological processes which affect an individual's feelings of self worth, confidence and feelings of entitlement. Class was a significant dynamic in relation to the way women saw their worlds. My concern was to be sensitive and to acknowledge and value differences, attempting not to stereotype or pathologize (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). I constantly moved between commonalities and differences in all our experiences. Although my own education and lifestyle has been privileged relative to the women in my study, I also experience many of the dilemmas and constraints which women have to deal with in attempting to balance the different parts of our lives and create something for ourselves within social structures which limit our opportunities. The experience of mothering was an important commonality, although not all the women I interviewed were mothers, and there were significant differences in the experiences of those who were. David, Davies, Edwards, Reay and Standing (1996) have argued that because all mothers do not have the same resources they are not making their choices under the same circumstances and, as I have already described, the discourses of patriarchal society operate differently according to social group and the social setting. For example, my position as a white middle class married mother placed me in a different position to some of the dominant, critical discourses about the family from that of some of the black or white

working class women, in my study, especially those who were lone parents. David et al have usefully discussed the issues this raises for researchers - the identification of concerns and the empathy that results, but also the difficulties of dealing with difference which may bring into question the adequacy of the researcher's mothering of her own children in terms of dominant discourses of parenting such as the negative effects on a child's development linked with mothers going out to work.

Disclosure by the researcher about her personal experiences has been promoted by some researchers including Cook and Fonow (1984) and Bristow and Esper (1988), as a way of developing a dialogue rather than the question and response situation within an interview. Whilst this may seem more democratic, there are also possible 'abuses' such as the interviewer using the interviewee's time to exercise her obsessions or give them personal information that the interviewee feels uncomfortable with (the sort of behaviour that students sometimes complain about in tutorials). Furthermore, Maynard (1994) has pointed out that employing techniques such as sharing personal information in the interview, does not remove power dynamics. This was a particular concern for me as students knew that I was employed in the college. I was careful that I did not over load them with information about the different pressures in my own life and run the risk of burdening them with my problems or conversely appearing as 'supermum' and thereby diminishing their own efforts and ability to cope with them. Finch (1984) has also suggested that sharing of information rather than being an exchange might result in women exposing more of their private lives and inner feelings than on reflection they would have wished. Great sensitivity therefore needs to be exercised within the interview. I became aware through our conversations, that some of the women had boundaries about their family relationships which I chose not to probe. Other women made revelations about very personal aspects of their lives which surprised me as I shall go on to discuss in more detail.

Edwards (1993a) suggests that self disclosure can be an important way to generate solidarity among women, although every woman has a different history and cultural experience. The inclusive language in the interview used by both the women and myself indicates that the common experience of being a woman, the 'we' was important. At different moments the women and myself identified with each other's experience, but it was important that I remained aware of difference.

Within interviews a 'double subjectivity' (Lewis and Meredith, 1988:16) operates with the researcher's own history and assumptions and the perceptions of participants about the research and the researcher affecting the interaction. Whilst I carefully noted respondents' reactions to questions at the time of the interview, I did not note my own, although I was self aware. After the interviews I

played back the tapes to check the language that I had used and my tone of voice to see if I was being judgmental, expressing feelings, or introducing ideas which changed the nature of the discussion and therefore needed to be considered when interpreting the texts.

Glucksmann (1994) has argued that the unequal relation to knowledge within the research context of the interviewer and interviewee cannot be overcome whatever methods and approaches are used. She bases this view on the different interest in, and relation to, their position that those who are being researched have from the researcher which partly 'derives from socially determined structural divisions of knowledge between people found in society at large' (Glucksmann, 1994:156). My education and research had invested me with relatively more power than the women I interviewed. The women's return to education was, as I shall discuss, motivated by a wish to gain knowledge and the economic and social status that accompanies it.

Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) have suggested that some notions of respondent involvement, aimed at politicising participants in order that they can later engage in actions which challenge the conditions of their oppression, may not fully address the issues of the power differential within the relationship between researcher and researched. This is because these notions fail to recognise the responsibilities the researcher has for her research. Acker, Barry and Esseveld's (1983) experience confirms that whilst researchers may seek to democratise the research process, participants may prefer the researcher to take the responsibility for the research. Whilst the women I talked with had an interest in the topics we discussed, the production of knowledge was my project and not theirs: they had the right to be treated with respect and to contribute to the analysis of their experiences but the responsibility was mine.

The management of the interviews

I was acutely aware of the difference in status between the women and myself within the college, although in the event it may have been more of a problem for me than my student interviewees - as part time students with busy lives they were not particularly interested in, or concerned about college hierarchies. I never mentioned my seniority and asked tutors to say I was a colleague. Students made immediate connections with the fact that, like most of them, I was a student parent and it soon became clear that they were very pleased to be able to share their concerns with someone who would understand their experiences. Most had limited support from friends or family who could understand the pressures they were under.

Making contact with students via their tutors not only enabled me to interview people from different courses, of different ages, class and ethnic origin, as already described, but also allowed me to follow up their progress at a distance - minimising 'researcher effect' as far as possible. Details of the interview were confirmed by a visit to the studio or workshop where they were working or by telephoning them at home from my own home with the noise of children and family activity in the background. I had drafted a letter for students describing my research and the format of the interview but decided that this might be intimidating or off-putting, especially as some of them might be second language speakers or Basic Education students.

I often met them in the college canteen and we were able to talk informally about my research, their courses, our children in a relaxed way on the way to the interview room. The use of my office for the interviews caused me some concern but was the result of needing a quiet space where we could talk uninterrupted for up to two hours. I think that its informal 'domestic' arrangement with curtains, plants, paintings executed by my children, coffee and biscuits and a touch of disorder allowed for a relaxed atmosphere to develop which would have been difficult to create in any other college space. The complexity of the women's lives certainly made it unlikely that we would have been able to meet anywhere else, including their own homes.

I dressed simply and behaved informally throughout. First names were always used, particularly as I did not want to focus attention on my full name which is on college literature. Morley (1996) has described an 'under-cover agent' approach, which seems to be promoted by many male ethnographers, highlighting that this may result in researchers,

'fabricating what can feel like fraudulent social relations in order to gather data and develop one's career' Morley, (1996:138).

Women operating in a man's world learn to play down certain aspects of their lives according to the circumstances. My interactions at home with my children are not the same as those with senior male colleagues at work. I separate aspects of my life in an attempt to reduce the effect of negative dominant discourses about working mothers on my career - for example the implication that I do not have the same commitment to the business as male and single female colleagues or that I am unlikely to be available for evening meetings or might take time off work if my children are sick. We all choose what we reveal about ourselves to others. I never attempted to be deceptive in any of my research relationships. It was important to me that there could be mutual respect and trust in the relationship and I wanted to be open and honest when I was asking other people to be the same. I

drew on my professional management experience of the field but privileged my researcher role and my experiences of being a mature woman student in my research relationships. This included sharing my own experiences and concerns, things I would not usually discuss in college. By making some personal disclosures myself more data came forward from interviewees. Kennedy Bergen (1993) has stated that she found this essential to the establishment of a relationship based on trust and mutual interaction.

The interviews were semi-structured in that I identified the broad areas I wanted to cover in each one and some key questions, but allowed our conversations to develop according to the issues the students themselves wanted to discuss (Spradley, 1979). In this way each interview was part of the analysis (which was further developed in the transcription and coding as I shall describe) and helped me to identify areas to be covered in future interviews.

At the start of each interview I re-stated my purposes, the format and time they had available, confidentiality and confirmed that interviewees were still happy to have our conversation taped. All interviewees were then asked to give me a brief biographical life history as a way of getting them talking, but more importantly it helped me to gain an insight into the ways in which each woman constructed and made sense of her life at this particular moment. It enabled me to start to form a picture of the ways in which education, employment and family fitted together in their lives. The conversations then developed according to the women's particular concerns about being mature students. I asked open questions to encourage reflection and analysis. I also added information about myself where this seemed appropriate in order to develop our relationship.

Occasionally extra, important comments were made after the end of the interview, for example Lizzie wanted to tell me more about the extent of her husband's violence and her feelings about this. In these instances, where it was relevant to my study, I made notes which I added later to the end of the transcript.

Sensitive subjects and problems with researching the 'private' sphere of family

My research concerned the total experience of female students not just the time they spent in college. I realised that this would take me into areas that some students would regard as private and that I would need to be sensitive to what might appear prying or rude. Pahl (1985) and Kennedy Bergen

(1993) have suggested that research into the family is unlikely to be welcomed because it 'delves into the private sphere, which is often perceived as 'sacred' '

(Kennedy Bergen, 1993:199). The family has historically represented a haven of love and affection, a private sphere absent of the violence that characterises larger society and free from outside interference. There is an expectation that women's role is to be loyal and to manage harmony in the home. However, I shall reveal in the next chapter that this image of the family was at variance with the lives of many of the women I spoke with.

Edwards (1993a) has stated that in her research with mature women students concerning family life, some had not wanted intrusions from outside and even referred to 'my private life' (Edwards, 1993a:187). None of the women I interviewed used this particular phrase, although one told me that she would discuss most things with her tutors except 'intimate' details about her boyfriend. She was, however, willing to talk to me at length about her son and her ex-husband. The fact that the majority of the women (eight) did not have partners living with them, may partially account for this openness about their family, relationships with men being considered the most private area in their lives (Edwards, 1993). Most of the women I interviewed were very forthcoming about the lack of support from ex-partners and about their feelings about their parents. Negative male attitudes to their abilities and efforts to learn were among the most frequently occurring codes (55 times in nine interviews). I have to admit to being surprised at how forthcoming some of the women were about their family relationships and indeed shocked at the repression, degradation and violence that some of them had been subjected to - some disclosures went far beyond the remit of this study but reveal that there is much research that needs to be done in this area in order to expose cruelty and injustice and bring about change.

The women talked freely about the problems they had fitting study around the demands of their families. They knew that this was a situation we shared. Being 'a good mother' was important to them and they were keen to tell me about their children's successes but were also disarmingly frank about problems. Floella told me that her son had been 'a naughty boy', 'my son is a criminal' (Floella, interview) and explained how managing his behaviour and their relationship had motivated her to change the direction of her career.

Analysis and the role of the researched

How far are interviewees involved with description and how far with analysis? An important principle within feminist research has been that the process should 'empower' participants. Opie (1992) has suggested that there a number of ways in which participants may be individually empowered through their involvement in a research project which employs an unstructured interview approach thus allowing issues of personal interest to be discussed. She has argued that this mode of responsive interviewing, when used reflexively, can enable people from marginalised groups to be empowered because they are able to contribute to both the description and analysis of a social issue. Applying this theory to my own practice, I suggest that by taking part in the research, the invisible parts of female students lives have been revealed and that this revelation is a political act. In the words of one of my respondents, a college counsellor,

“in telling the story something happens, something changes” (Marina, Interview)

Opie (1992) has argued that the participant-centred interview style has a therapeutic dimension which she characterises as empowering. This is an interesting idea and one to which I gave careful consideration before I started interviewing. My conversations with students were likely to touch on areas of women's lives which might be distressing to them. The sympathetic listening mode I was to adopt as a researcher might be equated with the female supportive caring role, the discourse which holds women responsible for the well being of others. My role as a researcher was not to be that of a counsellor or therapist, yet I was clear in advance that I would not allow an interview to end leaving a participant distressed or with the feeling of having been 'used' by me for my own advancement. It is interesting to note that perhaps the most personal and traumatic disclosures which women made were not in response to direct questioning. They were incidents from the past which affected them now but which they were managing. The telling of these stories was their choice and perhaps a way of them celebrating their survival and their ability to take control, a re-assurance that they had the power to manage current difficulties. In this way it could be argued that some of the interviews had the relatively empowering effect suggested by Opie (1992).

The women's descriptions of their lives were simultaneously a construction of events and an interpretation of them. They may not always have linked their experiences to the notion of patriarchal relations and wider social structures, but their comments demonstrate that they contested their social position. Coping with a return to education had involved the women in a process of self

evaluation, analysis and decision making. I suggest that the interviews were an extension of a process already begun. They gave the women a space in which to explore issues of concern to them and, through focusing on particular events, to analyse and refine their understanding and perhaps re-position themselves within discourses. This process was particularly evident when I interviewed two women (Petra and Lorna), already friends, together. The trust and knowledge of each other allowed for more robust and challenging exchanges than I would have felt appropriate for me to engage in because of my relative power within the situation.

I am pleased if any of the women gained confidence as a result of the interview process. It was not my project to raise their consciousness in terms of feminism or involve them directly in a political act. As Maynard (1994) points out, social change and empowering participants are different activities and she has warned against simplistic notions of what might be achieved. Glucksmann (1994) has similarly cautioned against making assumptions that feminist research is necessarily feminist politics. My aim in this research was to develop a feminist praxis and produce really useful knowledge which can be used to make a difference in terms of women's educational opportunities, both within the college but, crucially also, in terms of policy change at a national level.

I did discuss issues emerging from the study with colleagues and later at educational conferences in order to gain a sense of the generalisability of the data and also as part of feminist praxis and my wish to see my research influence policy and practice. However, the final selection of quotations and analysis is mine. What is presented is not intended to be a final 'truth' but the expression of feelings and perceptions at a particular moment in time. Sometimes the sections of conversations quoted give voice to an individual but more often they have been used because they articulate particularly well the experiences of many women, reflected in the frequency with which some codes recurred within the texts, often linking more widely with the experiences of women represented in other research.

Issues beyond research and ending the research relationship

In a number of interviews, issues arose which related to the women's experience of being students, but to involve myself in trying to resolve these problems had the potential to change our relationship. This was because the issues related to the knowledge I had as a college manager about subjects such as bursaries and learning support, and were outside my role as researcher.

A traditional view of research in general has been that it should be objective. As I have already discussed, 'researcher effect' is an important issue and researchers such as Edwards (1993a) and Glucksman (1994), have been at pains to minimise their impact, making explicit ways in which they may have had an influence on data collection and analysis. Involvement with respondents beyond the research remit is a delicate ethical matter. Where sensitive research topics are concerned, it is perhaps helpful to consider the situation more in terms of the consequences of researcher non involvement. Feminist researchers such as Oakley (1981) and Cook and Fonow (1984) have debated the moral implications of researchers distancing themselves from their respondents and not offering information or help which was within their power to provide. Whilst the consequences of withholding information from the women in my research were not as potentially harmful as in other projects where women are researching topics such as health or sexual abuse, I made the decision that should I be in receipt of information that would be helpful to the women, I would not hesitate to pass this on after the interview. On several occasions I referred students to college services or external agencies, particularly concerning financial help (financial problems came up 28 times within 8 interviews). I also gave Morag information about a part time British Sign Language course in order to help her realise her wish to work with deaf children. She subsequently enrolled on this course but there is no way of knowing how much this was the result of the information I gave her. In general, I distanced myself from individuals, giving them information but not offering personally to sort their problems out. An exception was that I agreed to be interviewed by one woman as part of her own research.

The women's stories touched parts of my own experience. Their attempts to study were blocked by numerous obstacles and I was happy to be able to suggest ways around them, as a researcher, or as an educational professional or just another daughter, wife, mother, sister - another woman struggling to find some space and make meanings.

Feminist researchers including Kirkwood (1993) and Edwards (1993a) have discussed the importance of considering how the research interview is drawn to a close and the post - interview feelings that respondents may have, particularly when discussions have probed personal and sensitive areas of women's lives. Each of my interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. At the end of each interview I made sure that the women had an opportunity to ask me any questions they had about the study and 'wind down', moving the conversation to focus on what they were doing next that day. Aware that people sometimes feel retrospectively that there were things they wish they had not said (Finch, 1984), I told respondents that I would not touch the tape of our

conversation for a week and that if in retrospect they felt unhappy with the interview, I would wipe the tape. This would of course not change the fact that the conversation had taken place but would give them the choice as to whether or not it was used as part of my research. No one asked me to do this. I explained once more how confidentiality would be maintained.

Edwards (1993a) suggests that 'self-disclosure' can help lessen any disturbing after effects of a respondent's own disclosures on a sensitive research topic. At the end of the series of interviews, Edwards gave each woman a printed sheet detailing her own experiences of being a mature student in higher education. This was not a process I chose to use.

To some extent it could be argued that the conversations that the women had with me were extensions of conversations they were already having with tutors and fellow students and linked with the internal conversations that they were having with themselves about their decisions to return to education. The women commented on how supportive lecturers and other students were, so I knew that there were a variety of forums where issues could be further explored and 'answers' found. However I was acutely aware of my responsibility to them. All the respondents, without exception, told me how much they had enjoyed the opportunity to talk about their experiences and agreed that I could contact them again in the future.

Chance meetings with the women offered opportunities to find out how we were progressing with our different projects, although these occasions were few. Sometimes the tutors fed back to me how much the women had valued our discussion. The women on the Access to Humanities programme asked me for a copy of the initial interview questions I had drafted because they had found their conversations with me valuable and wanted to give other students in the group the opportunity to share their feelings about the difficulties of returning to education and to develop between them mutual support strategies.

Follow up telephone calls with the women, some time after the interviews had taken place, indicated that they had found talking to me a positive experience (see appendix I). I told them to what uses I had put the data and they were all pleased that I had used it to argue for policy change in relation to educational opportunities for women.

Personal response to the research

Stanley and Wise (1993) have argued that the researcher is also a subject of her research. Therefore my decision to reveal something of my own personal history and feelings about this research is not only in order that judgements can be made about the way, as researcher, I may have influenced the research findings, but also so that I can reflect on the way in which my research has affected me.

Kirkwood (1993) has written about the use in her research of personal response to disclosures in interviews with women. She became aware that the emotions she felt not only affected her research but changed her as a person. Kirkwood's research was with women who had left abusive partners and specifically explored their experiences during and after the relationships. My research did not set out to focus on the relationships between the women and their partners or ex-partners, but two women disclosed that they had left men who had physically abused them. Whilst these revelations were shocking, the women projected themselves as survivors of these relationships. Perhaps the most distressing aspect for me, was to see the way in which intelligent women who worked hard in all aspects of their lives, could have so little confidence in their abilities and have so little control over their time. There was a difference between knowing this as a 'professional' with many years experience in adult and further education and hearing individual stories and personal revelations.

'As feminist researchers, women who experience the subordination we study, we are constantly shocked or overwhelmed at the realities we un-cover, at what lies under the silencing of women. This shock shakes our foundations and our understanding of ourselves. We realise how much change must occur to end the subordination of women. We also illuminate new directions for change and new depths of the change we seek. We are faced with both the possibilities of change and the shock of needing to find a way to bring about change' Kirkwood (1993:29)

There were occasions when making 'real' use of the data seemed more important than writing this thesis, that the feminist project should be privileged above 'selfish interest'. I was distracted by the demands of family and job, I felt tired and I doubted my intellectual capacity. I recognised in myself the same feelings that my respondents had expressed about their own studies. Setting these emotions in the structural framework that my research gave me helped me to cope at an intellectual level but did not necessarily diminish the depth of what I felt.

INTERPRETATION

Engagement in the field helped me to define the research question and the research instruments. The phasing of interviews, transcription, coding and writing allowed me to engage in 'constant comparison' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:277) and to begin to develop ideas and concepts which could be used to focus future interviews. I shall now discuss the ways in which I used evidence in order to develop concepts.

Tapes, transcripts - the ownership of words and control of interpretation after the interview

'feminist researchers can only try to explain the grounds on which selective interpretations have been made by making explicit the process of decision - making which produces the interpretation, and the logic of the method on which these decisions are based. This entails acknowledging complexity and contradiction which may be beyond the interpreter's experience, and recognizing the possibility of silences and absences in their data' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994:7)

I found Opie's (1988 and 1992) work on the deconstruction of texts in research helpful in my attempt to minimise authority and ideological appropriation. Opie (1988) has argued for the production of texts which incorporate 'multiple voices' arguing the value of this practice as a way of empowering participants and of advancing theory. In relation to this practice she has identified three key issues: the criteria for selecting quotations, the question as to whether including extracts from interviews is an adequate means by which 'other voices' can be present within the study; and the issue as to whether the researcher alone should be responsible for the interpretation (Opie, 1992). I shall now describe the analytical process I followed after each group of interviews and make clear the extent to which I was able to include not only 'other voices' but interpretation of texts beyond my own.

Every woman that I interviewed was told that she could request a copy of her own transcript. Only one person did request a copy which I supplied (minus coding notes). Some researchers have argued the importance of involving the researched throughout the analysis and writing process as a means of incorporating other voices and of limiting distortion of meanings. For example, Skeggs (1994) allowed the young women in her research to listen to the tapes and respond in order to monitor the legitimacy of her interpretation of their conversations. I did not provide copies of tapes or transcripts automatically. This is because, although I would wish the researched to have access to their own words as a recognition of their investment in the research process, I am also aware of the dangers in

this approach, particularly given the precise method I use which is to transcribe verbatim with every pause and change of voice intensity. The result is typical of conversational speech with redundancy, repetitiveness half completed sentences and interruptions. The linguistic features of class, regional accents and bi-lingualism are evident including non standard grammar. As a result, to the unfamiliar reader they may appear inarticulate, faltering 'un-educated'. Many of the women in my research were acutely concerned with their lack of formal educational qualifications and after careful consideration and discussion with some colleagues, I decided that there was a greater risk of their feelings of inadequacy being reinforced by this act, rather than it empowering them (7).

I also took the decision not to routinely give interviewees drafts of the study in order to check interpretation. Involving the women during this process would, I believe, have increased the risk of individuals being identified, especially as all the students were from the same college and some from the same programme area (even though pseudonyms were used from the earliest stage). The risk would have been heightened because of the way I write. My texts develop through successive drafts which start initially with extracts from interview transcripts grouped according to emerging codes. To these I add over time analytical notes based on the quotations from the transcripts and referenced to other research texts and data from additional interviews. Through this process of progressive focusing the key concepts develop and deeper analysis takes place. I did however check some non-confidential details with personal tutors in an attempt to understand the context some remarks were made in. I also had chance 'corridor meetings' with students when they spontaneously added extra information. The analytical process started in the interview had not only continued for me but for them as well and it was not unusual for one of the women to say that she had been thinking about our conversation and had gained some new insights she wanted to share.

However, in the interviews, time had emerged as a very valuable resource (with a frequency count of 35). I decided that to ask these women, who had volunteered to be interviewed, to participate further might add another pressure to their lives. This concern also contributed to my decision not to involve them in any formal way in analysis beyond that which was an aspect of 'making meanings' within the interview itself.

Opie (1992) has argued for the consideration of textual features as well as content to be part of the analysis, selection and presentation of quotations. In addition to recording audio tapes of each interview, I had a note pad on which I could discreetly note any special behavioural features or comments made after the tape was switched off. During the interviews with students I observed

respondents' body language, including eye contact, in order to help me gauge the degree of engagement or discomfort with areas of questioning. I was thus able to adjust my questions or style of interaction such as taking on a more 'active listening' pose or making encouraging remarks. Whilst interviewing I occasionally wrote down key words accompanied by symbols to help identify points in the conversation when body language appeared to reveal or emphasise meaning. Examples included loss of eye contact, increased fidgeting or displacement movements, leaning forward or slumping backwards in the chair, or pointing. Whilst excitement, laughter or anger can usually be detected by listening to an audio tape, the unexpected smile, raised eyebrow, grimace or loss of eye contact can not. I did not attempt to use 'choreographic notation' to give a detailed log of movements but to capture the odd moments which seemed to me at the time important indicators of meaning. The notation was brief and in a personal shorthand as I did not want note taking to divert me or my respondent away from our conversation.

I transcribed all my interviews myself as a means of familiarising myself with the conversations and of gaining an insight into the deeper meanings of particular comments. The cultural diversity of my respondents made language an important feature. Particular emphases were recorded in the written transcript and at intervals during the research and writing stages I re-listened to tapes to check my understanding and interpretation. Opie's discussion on 'contradictory moments' was helpful in working towards an understanding of sections of interview which were initially confusing. For example, when I asked Floella if she felt that her experiences as a black woman had been valued by staff and students, she replied "yes" but then gave me an example which clearly illustrated the opposite. Replaying this section of tape several times confirmed that she had no apparent awareness about this contradiction. I have attempted to expose contradiction and paradox rather than give value to one side of the contradiction over the other.

Quotations appear in verbatim speech with all the repetitions, pauses and special features such as laughter included. One particular passage used in chapter 4 was selected and quoted at length because of the repeated use of the word 'rush' which portrayed vividly the woman's experience and feelings about it (see page 131).

Theoretical sampling - Coding

Theoretical sampling as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is undertaken in order,

‘to discover categories and then properties, and to suggest the interrelationships into a theory’
(Glaser and Strauss, 1967:62)

I coded each interview transcript on completion. At this stage I noted anything which might be of significance. Sections were marked with a highlighter and comments written in the margins. These ‘primary’ codes were then listed at the end of each transcript. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest, throughout this process I questioned whether the category was meaningful and useful, how I could elaborate and develop it, whether it led to sub-categories or to new categories. (For each interview of approximately an hour’s duration I ended up with between 50 - 70 major headings and sub-categories.) I wrote code notes to explore any which seemed particularly significant but I was careful not to leap to interpretation too early.

When a number of transcripts had been coded in this way, I began a process of ‘deep coding’ and developed a ‘code map’ (see figure 3) which made links and showed dynamic relationships and inter-relationships. New data was continuously fed in and categories compared and tested. I was involved in constant questioning - were there new codes, were any existing codes redundant or were the ones I had too generalised and in need of refining? I heeded Glaser and Strauss’ advice:

‘core theoretical categories, those with the most explanatory power, should be saturated as completely as possible. Efforts to saturate less relevant categories should not be made at the cost of resources necessary for saturating the core categories’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:70)

Thus my coding and analysis focused^{on} my questioning of respondents. As I became more deeply immersed in the data, I began to cut down the list of codes in a process of ‘delimiting the theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:109) and began to ‘formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:110),

I logged the frequency with which each code occurred in the transcripts and these became the main headings under which the sub-codes and the writing were organised. A frequency count is included (see figure 4). Emerging theories were tested via data from additional interviews, discussions with staff and comparison with the findings of other researchers.

I kept a second un-marked set of transcripts for later use which would allow me to revisit the data and not be influenced by previous links and analyses. I hoped in this way to allow new or different meanings to emerge.

Frequency was not the only criteria used in terms of writing up data. Some of the 'lesser codes' and data which seemed to be at variance with the rest of the texts were important because they indicated alternative or more complex meanings. It was also important to recognise the different experiences of women and ensure that a number of different voices were heard (Opie, 1992).

After the coding was completed I still frequently returned to both transcripts and audio tapes to check my understanding but also because it gave me inspiration to hear the way the women talked about their lives. I am in total agreement with Skeggs (1994) that

'Repeated listening to tapes is often a neglected area of analysis and yet one of the most essential. I dutifully transcribed my first set of tapes - it took ages, and was useful, but now I selectively transcribe tapes for what seems appropriate at the time. Re-listening to tapes is a lot more inspiring than re-reading transcripts' (Skeggs, 1994:84)

Writing

Writing is part of the analytical process because in order to commit ideas to paper the meaning has to be examined and clarified. From the earliest stages of my research I was involved in writing (Becker, 1986) tentative and exploratory code notes which teased out concepts and more discursive passages which began to link quotations from the women with other texts and continue the process of analysis. Research was simultaneously a variety of activities: interviewing, coding, writing, reading, reflection. Each new set of information led to a revised draft and a clearer picture of the form the final study would take. This was partly because the time I had available to me for this project, like the women I was researching, came in bits and pieces. The largest challenge I had was to find sufficient periods of quiet, un-interrupted time in order to draw together the data from the variety of different sources I was using - tapes, transcripts, code notes, field notes, published research - and produce fluent and considered text.

Ball (1990a) has discussed the shift that often takes place between the ethnographic process and writing up, a shift which may mean that the researcher adopts what he calls 'a sanitised scientific style'. He suggests,

'presumably we should attempt to relate social theory to research method, substantive theory to epistemology, and presentation and style to ontology' (Ball 1990a:170)

Figure 4. MAIN CODE FREQUENCY COUNT - STUDENTS

CODE	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	Total
Stress	III I		III	II	I	II		III I		III III		I		I	30
'Threshold fear'	II		III	III	II	I		II	II	III	III				22
Lack of confidence in own skills	III III III I		III II	III	III I	I		III III	III III	I	III			III	56
Guilt - 'neglect' of family	III		III III		III I	III		I	II	I		II	I	I	28
'Selfishness'			I		III I	II			I					I	11
Need for status/ qualification	III	III		III		III		I		III	II	II		II	28
Financial problems	II		III III	III	I	III III		I		I		I			28
Childcare problems	III	I	II		III	I	III	III II		I		III	II	II	31
Accommodation related problems	III		III		I			II				I		I	13
Isolation as a mother	III II	II	II		III I	I	I	I		III		II			23
Status as lone mothers	II		I		III			II				I			12
Role model for children	II	III			III I	I	I	III	II	I			I	II	21
'Key tutors'	III III		III II	II		I		III III	II		I			II	31
Routine as a coping strategy	III		III I	I	II	II	II	II	I	III		III	II	III	32
Lack of time	I		III	III	III II	III	II		I	III		III	I	III III	35
Negative male attitudes to study	III III III		III III III		II	III			III		III III	II	II	III	55
Importance of peer group support	III		III I	III	III	III	III		III		III	I			31
Their age a concern to them			II	I	I	III		II	I					I	11
Making a difference to others - family /society	III	II	I		I	III		III II	III II			I	I		24

Ball's focus is on the researcher's interaction with the actors and retaining the energy and truth of the process by engaging in a process of reflexivity. Feminist writers such as Hochschild (1975) and Kirkwood (1993) would go further to suggest that the sanitised scientific style needs to be challenged by women because it is a methodology developed by men and which privileges qualities such as reason, logic and objectivity which have generally been ascribed to men and valued above female skills and qualities such as sensitivity to emotion and collaboration. Kirkwood argues that to examine the researcher's response as part of the analytical process of research not only adds another tool for understanding human behaviour but contests patriarchal culture which values 'rational men' above 'emotional women'.

'the exploration of emotions in research methodology is central to feminist aims to create research for women and to expose the ways in which women are devalued within cultural beliefs and attitudes. It is because the division of these aspects of human response are gendered, and correspondingly assigned the values and status associated with each gender, that the use of personal response in research is of particular importance to feminist research' Kirkwood (1993:23)

Stanley and Wise (1993) have advocated that feminists involved in writing and research should be 'more adventurous, more daring and less concerned with being respectable' (Stanley and Wise, 1993:137). Whilst this is exciting, it also presents a risk for someone who has yet to establish a reputation as a researcher. The process I use in writing seems to owe much to my initial education and training in art and design. This I would define as using material from a variety of sources, sketching ideas in and allowing the final 'image' to emerge over time. It was always important to me to have an overall feel for the balance of the whole project even though I might be working on a detail. Trying ideas out and abandoning some of them later in the process and keeping everything 'fluid' until the last moment was a natural way for me to work.

RIGOUR AND BOUNDARIES OF THIS STUDY

The limitations of this study can be defined within three linked areas: theory, methodology and generalisability.

There has been a general lack of research in further education as compared with other sectors of education and a particular lack of interest in what individual students experience and how

their feelings about this affects their achievements, either in terms of institutionally defined outcomes or, more especially, personal learning goals. I have therefore drawn on other literature such as that related to women's experiences of higher education, (Morrison, 1992; Edwards, 1993; Berry, 1995) adult education (Thompson, 1980, 1983, 1988, 1995; McGivney, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1996; Coats, 1994,1996) and the family (David, 1980; Gittins, 1985) and to work on education markets in schools (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992). The work of Morrison and Edwards in particular has been influential on my thinking. Whilst the data from their research with higher education students generally supports my own further education data in terms of the impact of male partners and children on women returning to study, there are important differences revealed in the ways in which the women see themselves in relation to education. The differences in culture between the further and higher education sectors and the perceived differences of the status of knowledge, academic or vocational would appear to affect the choices women make. Certainly, for those students in my study who were considering progressing to higher education, this decision posed an altered set of practical and emotional considerations. Our studies are also different because our intentions were different. My own study focuses on policy and, thus, there is discussion about the political context in which the learning opportunities for women are provided and the tensions experienced by college managers. This is not a central feature of the other studies.

The paucity of research in further education does however mean that my study makes an original contribution to research especially in relation to revealing the hidden lives of mature women students and in particular the significance of family experiences for them as learners. The inclusion of biographical data adds the dimension of time and looks beyond the women's immediate college experiences (the subject of most research in FE) to describe the ways in which women use education to acquire social capital and make changes in their lives, over time. The use of the conceptual tool of 'habitus' allowed me to explore the similarities and differences between women students and their life trajectories and to highlight the types of resources which they could draw on in terms of their education. A 'lack of fit' is revealed between the type of educational experience women want and that which is being provided by government.

My familiarity with the research setting could have resulted in commonplace procedures, situations and events being accepted rather than questioned, and in this way significant issues could have gone unnoticed (Becker, 1986; Measor and Woods, 1991). In order to address this

concern and probe 'taken for granted' meanings, I adopted the 'naive questioning' approach suggested by Burgess (1984). Reflexivity was also an important aspect in the way I interacted with the data. My position within the organisation gave me access to a range of internal documents and data. In general I chose not to access these. An exception was two sets of essays written by Access course students concerning their experiences of returning to education which their tutor thought might be of interest. The comments supported many of the points made by the women I interviewed thereby confirming a level of generalisability. What they also revealed was that where the essays were written by people I had interviewed, the written scripts were far more guarded. The women chose not to expose as much personal information, nor were they as analytical as in their conversations with me. They confirmed that my chosen methodology was well suited to my enquiry.

The size of the sample, fourteen women, was arguably small. This limitation in the size of group was balanced with the depth of questioning, rigorous coding and the richness of data that this technique produced. The issues I wanted to explore were not capable of being accessed through large scale data collection procedures. The intrusive methods I necessarily employed relied on my ability to build trust between myself and my respondents. I suggest that the result is a rich and vivid portrayal of larger cohorts in the college as evidenced through my initial survey, interviews with staff and other research literature concerned with mature women students. I believe that further evidence of the generalisability of my data is the support for my findings that I have received from colleagues across the sector (NIACE conference 1995, FEDA research conference 1997, 1998) with early findings contributing to national research (McGivney, 1996; Kennedy, 1997; Martinez, 1997).

I believe that this study makes a contribution to the body of knowledge about the recent history of further education. I hope that as a result, it will influence policy makers at government and sector level in order to make a difference for future students and their families. My sincere hope is that my findings will not be used as evidence to disadvantage further either mature women students, or the colleges who seek to help them achieve their personal learning goals and create a new future.

NOTES

1. At the local level this meant changes to college systems and procedures, especially regarding admissions and tutorial support. More broadly I have been involved in developing national standards for lecturers and staff training all of which has been informed by my research.
2. Findings from this survey were used by Veronica McGivney as part of her research for 'Staying or Leaving the Course' (1996)
3. 'Full time' is used here as a shorthand description of courses which required more than one day's attendance in college and a substantial time commitment for study outside class contact time.
4. The highest proportion of male staff work in the languages section, but this programme area does not offer substantial FE courses and therefore fell outside my research area.
5. Part-time teaching in adult and further education has often been a job which has attracted women because it could be fitted around their own domestic commitments (Hayes, 1991 - Women, Domestic Subjects and Adult Education MA Term Paper, King's College, London and Sellers, J. (1998) 'Juggling for a Living: the Working Lives of Women Adult Education Tutors' in Benn, R., Elliott, J. & Whaley, P. Educating Rita and Her Sisters, Leicester, NIACE).
6. Edwards suggests that when black women choose not to define themselves as working-class they are rejecting the class system of white society.
7. This decision was also influenced by a conversation with a feminist researcher, Diane Reay who told me how upset one of her working class respondents had been when she read her transcript because she thought she appeared un-educated.

CHAPTER 4

THE PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF FAMILIES ON WOMEN RETURNING TO EDUCATION

*“When you educate a man, you educate an individual.
When you educate a woman, you educate and liberate a nation”*

Al Hajj Malik-al Shabazz (Malcolm X)

Families Introduction

Feminist researchers such as David (1980), Gittins (1985), Oakley (1994)) have written about the ideological apparatus of ‘the family’ and argue that unlike the family on the back of the cereal packet which consists of mother and father and children functioning happily within a supportive environment, real families take on a myriad of forms - lesbian families, single-parent families, families with step-parents and children who divide their time between parents and are part of more than one family. The cultural traditions of different ethnic groups and social classes also impacts on the way the family is constituted and on the experience of individuals within it. Within families power relations are unequal and resources are not equally shared and within the privacy of the home, physical and emotional abuse often takes place (Pahl, 1985; Maynard, 1993). Women and children are more likely than men to be affected or disadvantaged by these features of living within the family.

Although, as Edwards (1993) has described, mature women students may wish to connect or separate their lives as students from their lives at home, the demands of both spheres impact on their actions and their feelings about themselves. Further education colleges’ need to optimise the money which is available via the FEFC funding methodology and to provide courses which permit students to remain eligible for state benefits, (1) has resulted in less lecturer contact time and more demands on students to do coursework on their own; consequently the world of college is transported into the domestic sphere in terms of books and course materials as well as ideas. The demands of their families affect students’ ability to attend college regularly and punctually and the attitudes of family members may well impact on women’s confidence about their academic abilities and their ability to cope with their studies. Whilst each woman’s

experience within the family will vary depending on cultural traditions and personal circumstances, their power and status is different from that of the male members of their families. So although their access to resources and experiences of oppression are different, there are common dilemmas that they face. However I am concerned not to present essentialist views of women or racial and class stereotypes within these groups (Gittins, 1985). The main intention here is to gain insights into the way in which family experiences informed the way women the students in my study made meanings and 'choices' concerning their return to education and to highlight the implications that this has for policy makers.

Women's experiences of their own initial schooling combine with their feelings about learning and achievement in adult life. (McIntosh, 1985). Those women who are also mothers reflect on the roles and attitudes of their parents in comparison with their own responsibilities for their children's welfare, future happiness and success and they make educational choices accordingly as I shall discuss in more depth in chapter 5. Women students are often simultaneously linked to their childhood families and adult families. They may have parents who are separated and have set up new families. They may themselves be separated from their children's fathers or have step-children. They may be grandmothers. What emerges is a complex inter-weaving of feelings and relationships; the strands of early experiences combining with those of the present, to build up a picture which illustrates the ways in which being a member of a family affects the choices and actions of mature students.

In this chapter I shall describe the ways in which being part of a family impacts on the lives of women students and show how interactions with their own parents, siblings, past and present partners and children, circumscribes the 'choices' they make about their own learning and their feelings about themselves as learners. I shall do this by considering four particular aspects:- the way the women's parents have impacted on their feelings about themselves as learners; the influence of current and ex (male) partners on the practical and emotional aspect of being a mature student; ways in which becoming a mother has affected the choices the women have made about their own education; and the ways in which mature students draw together the different strands of their lives to cope with the present and create the future for themselves and their children. These divisions serve a heuristic purpose, for as I have already described, lived reality is one of great complexity.

I have taken here a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to the empirical data in order to avoid theoretical imposition and minimise my own pre-conceptions as an educational professional 'distorting the logic of evidence' (Lather, 1991:62). Thus the issues raised and emphasis given to them results directly from my conversations with the women in my study and the subsequent coding and analysis of this data. I have privileged the themes which were the women's key concerns (see figure 4, code map and figure 3, main code frequency count). However, these themes and concerns need to be considered in terms of their importance for educational and social policy development. The implications of my findings for national and local policy are therefore identified in the final section of this chapter.

STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

In this first section I shall describe the feelings that the women in my study had about their parents' attitudes to their education and demonstrate how this continued to modify their view of themselves as adult learners.

Patriarchal relations and parent power

In the women's descriptions of their early lives, 'patriarchy' is evident both in terms of paternal authority and power and in the wider sense of limiting educational opportunities to those which fit women for their primary role as carers for others within the workplace or the home.

The ultimate male power within the family is perhaps sexual or physical power. Until the early 19th century children were defined in law as their father's property. His rights under British law included beating and in some instances incest (Gittins, 1985). In my research, physical and sexual abuse in childhood emerged as a factor which had limited achievement at school and resulted in low confidence and self esteem. Although only one woman made veiled comments to me about it, college lecturers and counsellors confirmed that they knew that this was an issue for a significant number of students. A child care lecturer told me,

'Many of them have a knowledge and history of abuse and tell us that in private or make it quite clear that it is a session that they can't handle because of their own emotional issues.'

We run selected days on child protection and we probably get up to 25% of students who don't come. [...] In a group of twenty students, I'd have at least three or four that have experienced abuse of one form or another' (Dawn, interview)

Morag told me that a number of students disclosed very distressing personal stories in their class discussions on child protection (2). Lecturers agreed that the choice of child care as a programme of study was sometimes a way for survivors of abuse to work through their feelings and reconstruct their futures.

Although the majority of the women did not report direct sexual or physical abuse, the authority and power of their fathers was often referred to by women across the range of social classes and ethnic groups represented. It was fathers who were held responsible for attitudes or decisions which affected not only what some of the women had done with their lives, but also their self esteem. Michelle's father (white, working class) made her leave home,

'My father used to put me down a hell of a lot. [...] I wasn't happy and then my dad chucked me out when I was fifteen because he'd had enough and so I couldn't carry on school' (Michelle, interview)

Lizzie's father, a clergyman (white, middle-class), was disappointed in her achievements because her siblings were academically successful with two going to Oxford University. He constantly criticised her,

'I suppose I was just mediocre. He thought I was a bit stupid, you know. He was always putting me down and when I got pregnant with my first child, it was like their first grandchild. They just didn't want to know - my mother wasn't like that, it was my father who just didn't talk to me' (Lizzie, interview)

Floella says that she lacks confidence, she thinks that this goes back to early schooling but also her father (black, African),

'My father is African, so education is important to him, and he thought I was always in a dream, but he was never cruel intentionally, but when I think about it, we were never quite good enough. He doesn't give praise freely' (Floella, interview).

Whilst the expectations of their fathers were constructed within different social habituses, the majority of the women in this study told me that their fathers had a common expectation that their daughters would conform and follow their wishes.

The influence of discourses concerning the subordinate and supportive role of women (as discussed in chapter 1), were implicated in the choices that the women in my study, had been encouraged to make. They had trained to become nurses or nursery nurses, they had left school at sixteen to work in a shop or factory, they were ‘filling in time’ until they were married. The limited futures projected for most of the women and the belief that parents (fathers) know what is best for their children (Oakley, 1994) resulted in several of the women saying that their parents had not supported them in their earlier career aspirations. Floella and her sister had been taken ‘on the road’ because of their father’s ambitions for them in show business; Lizzie had been encouraged to go into nursing by her father in order to be ‘useful to other people’ - a traditional caring role.

There is no doubt that economic factors had limited the opportunities for some of the working class women like Petra, their wage being needed in the family home, but participation in the types of education and training that some of the women aspired to was also perceived to be part of the cultural pattern of higher socio-economic groups and not their own (McGivney, 1990). Trish felt that when she left school she had been pushed into a ‘sensible’ business studies course rather than supported in her wish to study art,

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Trish | people like me didn’t go into art. I say to my mum, she comes to London for the weekend and I take her to the galleries and she sort of says “mm” (doubtfully) |
| Amanda | Why do you say that it is not a subject that people like you go into? |
| Trish | Just purely because of my background. I’d never been into an art gallery that I can remember before about eleven or twelve. I didn’t think that people like me could be painters |
| Amanda | How are people like you? |
| Trish | Just I suppose, just, I don’t know (pause) just average ‘northern’ (laughing) just I thought it was totally removed from you know |

(Trish, interview)

A number of the working-class women still struggled with the fact that they were likely to be the first member of their family to get a place in Higher Education. It was a spur to their efforts, but there was also a fear that they might not make the grade, that their temerity could lead to failure. Bourdieu (1985) has suggested that individuals carry knowledge or skills which have a hierarchy of status, those attributes which support the values of the dominant middle classes carrying more status and power than those of the working classes. Thus, for some of

the women, there was a tension between the desire to acquire cultural capital and generate social profits for themselves and their feelings of inferiority resulting from their habitus.

However, it may have been the case that some parents from minority ethnic groups did not encourage their daughters to remain in an education system staffed mostly by white people and dominated by white middle class values, because they themselves had felt undervalued and alienated by their own experiences of school or college (McGivney, 1990; Bird, 1996).

The influence of parents' attitudes on the women as adults

Their own parents attitudes towards them continued to affect the way that many of the women felt about their abilities to learn, and influenced the decisions they made in adulthood. McIntosh (1985) has argued that parental failure to support their daughters in their wish to follow non-traditional careers, can contribute to feelings of being 'an imposter' in adult life - the feeling of being a fraud when singled out for praise, or promotion. Many of the women in my study lacked confidence (mentioned fifty six times in ten interviews, see fig. 4 for breakdown) and often found it difficult to accept that selection for a course meant that lecturers believed that they had the necessary skills and application to succeed. The feelings that the women expressed about their parents' attitudes ranged from anger that they 'had not cared',

'At fourteen and a half I suddenly discovered boys and going out with my friends and dancing and that's why I was such a disappointment for my teachers because I was the student who throughout my time at school has been, you know, a grade A student [...] my mum was so taken up with my father's illness that she didn't care' (Petra, interview)

to feelings of failure that they had not be able to meet the high expectations of their parents (but mostly their fathers). Floella (black British of African parentage) is forty three with a son in his twenties and has had responsible jobs with BT and the BBC, yet her description of her worst moment since returning to college demonstrated the lingering influence of her own father,

'One tutor said, " I don't believe that any of you are doing this reading, I'm just sitting here blah, blah" and he sounded just like my father, you know and I felt guilty and I began to sulk, not because of him, but because he was stirring something and the girl next to me said, "How do you feel? I feel really bad" and I said, "Yes, so do I" ' (Floella, interview)

Floella told me that she had an excellent relationship with this lecturer and was able to deal with her feelings,

‘I could have taken it as an extraordinary personal burden - my teacher was making me feel, you know, emotional blackmail; or I could take it as it really was, which is to do the work and expect to get the results, which I did. I did suffer, but it was his way of making his point. He’s straight’ (Floella, interview)

Feelings about past experiences run deep and while lecturers may be aware that many adult returners have had negative experiences in their initial schooling, they may not be aware of the continuing presence and residual influence of parental power. This is an important issue for college managers to pursue in relation to lecturer training and the development of learner support.

Petra (white working-class) believed that the reason her mother is so pleased with her return to education is because of the prestige of having a member of the family go to university. This is because in the mining village where she grew up ‘university was for others, it wasn’t for you’ (Petra, interview) It was extremely important to her to gain a degree for herself, to make her mother proud of her and to set an example for her own children.

The need to prove their abilities to other people as well as themselves remained strong,

‘People always said , “You’re really intelligent but you lack discipline, you can never finish anything” so I suppose I had to prove something [...] I think mainly to my parents, really because they thought I wasn’t going anywhere and I was a bit of a drop out’ (Lorna, white working-class, interview)

‘I got the impression from teachers that they felt (pause) you’re only going to have kids, so what do you want a diploma for? So I think I need to prove to myself that other people can be wrong’ (Abimbola, black, interview)

What emerges is a common wish amongst the women, to challenge the structures and cultural and gendered ideologies which denied them educational opportunities earlier in life and restricted their choices in adult life (McRobbie, 1996; Griffin, 1985).

Some of the white, working-class women were clearly upset that their parents were still unable to relate to their wish to extend their education and that there was a gap in their communication. Trish’s parents are supportive of her return to college but have no interest in art or understanding as to why she needs to express herself visually. It has not been part of their life or culture. Michelle’s mother has encouraged her return to college and supported her with childcare, but her father continues to be negative,

‘My dad thinks I’m a dosser and it’s an excuse for me not to go to work because he thinks women shouldn’t have ambitions, you know, any old job that comes along be it cleaning or shops, as long as you’re bringing in money and not poncing off the tax payer (Michelle, interview)

Lorna’s parents do not seem to her to be interested in, or supportive of, her return to education, but she told me that she thinks that is quite helpful because it means she is doing it for herself, not to please them - but there still seemed to be disappointment in her words,

‘They didn’t want to know what subjects I was doing or anything like that, it was “Oh you’re going to university now, that’s nice, do you want a cup of tea?”, you know’ (Lorna, interview)

Lorna thought that her parents might be envious because neither of them went to university. However, could it also be that because of their lack of experience of Further and Higher Education, they do not know what to say or how to talk to her about it - has she grown away from them? The fear of growing apart from family or friends as a result of becoming involved in post compulsory education can be very powerful. It can dissuade students from joining a course (McGivney, 1990) or result in stress and in some instances non completion of courses (Edwards, 1993; Moore, 1995; McGivney, 1996).

The influence of what Bourdieu would term the ‘familial habitus’, the shared experiences, values and predispositions within the family, was clearly important in relation to the ‘choices’ that the different women made. Yet this was not the only influence, their decision-making was situated in a complex multi-layered context where the college, friendships within and outside college, the media and wider social attitudes all impacted (Reay, 1998a).

It is often adult friendships, especially the support of other students that help mature women students cope with the fears of isolation or failure. In some cases a different type of ‘family’ develops such as in Lorna’s situation where support has been built up from very deep emotional roots in the community where she lived following a nervous breakdown and received rehabilitation treatment for drug dependency. Pahl (1985) has commented on similar mutual support systems which develop in women’s refuges, where people with a shared history help each other to effect life changes.

Although some of the women told me that they did not care any more what their parents thought about them, it appeared that they did often still feel anger or frustration and seek parental approval.

Lizzie's return to college has altered her father's opinion of her. She is in some ways conforming to his middle-class values:

'Father thinks I'm wonderful now, whereas before he thought I was a complete idiot (laughing) that's a change [...] He used to tell me as a child "It's a shame you don't have looks because you aren't very bright are you?" a real downer.' (Lizzie, interview)

It has not altered her opinion of him for his past lack of support of her needs.

STUDENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Twelve out of the fourteen women in my study had children. Being a mother emerged as an important practical and emotional factor in terms of the choices these women made about returning to college. In this section I shall describe the ways in which participation in formal education and personal goals were affected by the women's position as mothers. I shall also make visible some of the tensions and dilemmas faced by women students with children.

Feelings of isolation and coping with becoming a parent

Becoming a parent is a major learning experience which changes your life for ever. It involves a change of status within the family and society, as has been discussed by feminist researchers including Oakley (1979). Sadly, for many women the early days of motherhood can lead to feelings of isolation, boredom and depression. (This was mentioned twenty three times, arising in nine interviews and cut across 'race' and class). As Oakley (1979) found in her research with first time mothers, most women are unprepared for the selfless and lonely work of looking after a baby. The reality is often far from the picture of 'happy families' with mums and dads, quiet contented babies and clean and tidy homes fostered by health professionals, women's magazines and the media. Oakley calls it 'a crisis in the life of a woman, a point of no return' (1979: preface). Women often find themselves restricted to the domestic sphere. Going to college can give a break from childcare, provide social contact with other adults and give a space for re-assertion of personal identity.

‘As my children grew up and I had time on my hands I decided to do something. I couldn’t quite decide what and I started attending a family workshop (3) [...] I started going there basically to get me out of the house. It was somewhere to go with my children. They had a crèche area’ (Petra, interview)

‘When you have children you lose so much self confidence. It’s a really big step like, coming back (to college). I think that a lot of it is to gain self confidence and socialising because it’s quite lonely when you have children, so you’re sort of isolated’ (Michelle, interview)

Michelle told me that she encourages other women, including her sister, to return to education because of the benefits she herself has enjoyed,

‘It’s a positive step, especially for women with children. I think that because of my experiences, you know, they’re left at home and a lot of the time they just don’t say anything, they go along with what their husband says a lot of the time. They sit at home and get bored and brain dead’ (Michelle, interview)

The change of status and life patterns that come with a new baby may also mean that parents’ own friendships reduce to social contact linked to their children, such as parents of their children’s school friends and neighbours. When the children grow up and parents have less involvement in their lives, there may be a new isolation, particularly when mothers have dedicated their lives to the needs of their children and not maintained their own social contacts. If their identity has been closely linked to being a mother and the nature of that role is changing, becoming a student can be part of creating the new feeling of self. As her family grew up Lizzie suddenly found herself having reduced contact with children and friends,

‘It (college) helped me to meet a whole group of people because if you’ve had children, maybe those people you’d known when your children were younger and theirs - they’ve all gone off and done jobs and done other things, so in a way you haven’t exactly lost friendships, but your friendships aren’t as close because people are so far away suddenly with their new jobs’ (Lizzie, interview)

Our increasingly mobile society and the contemporary nuclear family means that many women are often left on their own to cope, without a close knit community of family and friends to support them. There is therefore added isolation for those women who are bringing up children on their own,

‘I went back to drawing classes when my daughter was about six months old, so I kept my work going, but I found it difficult because my family are in the north. I don’t have any support really’ (Trish, interview)

Although ‘isolation’ was a common experience of the women in this study, within other communities, the extended family offers support for women in their role as mothers. However there may be pressure on the women to conform to cultural norms (Edwards, 1993; Afshar,

1994). In this way the isolation may be more in terms of limited contact with the outside world and reduced opportunity to follow personal interests, rather than lack of social contact.

Children as the motivation to return to education

The reasons the women gave for returning to education were often a combination of personal goals for themselves and aspirations for their families.

‘It’s either to get a job or to get a better job but a lot of it is actually to help their children, to help their children’ (Abimbola, interview)

Students often cited their children as part of their motivation for returning to education. Women students often talked to me about their desire to provide a better life for their children in terms of standards of living.

‘It was for my daughter’s sake, that’s what made me come originally. I’m struggling financially at the moment.[....] OK we haven’t got anything now, but in five years’ time, when she does need things, she hasn’t got now, then I will have gained qualifications and hopefully be working towards a degree to achieve them things.’ (Michelle, interview)

‘from being a one time failure, you know, I had a daughter, I had nothing to offer her and then all of a sudden achieving results’ (Michelle, interview)

Becoming ‘educated’ as the working-class women often described it, was important in terms of raised status and respect in the eyes of their children. Women from across the range of social groupings represented, wanted to be a role model to be proud of. (This code arose twenty one times in ten interviews).

‘I’d like to secure a better future for me and my son and also set an example, set a good example for him as well. You know, I think that’s nice. He already sees me writing essays [....] so it’s for him. I think it makes you evaluate your life a bit more. You know, you want more out of it. It’s not just money, I’d like him to be proud of me, and whatever and a good example, especially as I’m his main role model’ (Cleo, mixed-race, working-class, interview)

‘My son thinks I’m more intelligent now because I go to college’ (Petra, white, working-class, interview)

Returning to college was therefore also connected to mothers’ desires for their children, to help them to get a good start in life, gain good study habits and improve their life chances. Women talked about wanting to be able to help with their children’s education. In the case of some of

the working-class mothers there was clearly a mixture of pride and embarrassment that the children were becoming more academically advanced than their mothers.

Children may also be a 'negative' motivation. College may simply be a space away from children. Many of the women described the need to have personal time and be with adults.

'It's my little bit of independence' (Cleo, mixed-race, working-class, interview)

'It's sort of time on my own, away from my daughter' (Michelle, white, working-class, interview)

'It got me out of the house, I didn't have to worry about my child for two hours, I knew that she was being looked after and it was a social thing as well - I was meeting other people and the actual learning was quite low down. I did things like leatherwork and sewing' (Abimbola, black African, interview)

The women felt the need for adult company and intellectual stimulation, but they also expressed feelings of guilt, that their children were not getting a fair deal from them. This was particularly an issue if they stayed on at college to talk to friends rather than rushed home. Yet it may be that for a depressed parent, (which many of the women were at times), maintaining friendships and being part of the course group, supported them in low moments and helped them to cope with their caring responsibilities. This is not confined to parents of young children. It can also apply to women who have the main care of elderly or sick relatives and use education as a strategy to maintain their psychological health.

Children, poverty and economic factors

In conversations with staff and students, child related issues were often suggested as 'reasons' for under achievement and non-completion of courses by students across the range of social groupings. Many of the students I interviewed gave me examples of fellow students who had experienced difficulties keeping up with course work and had left their courses early because of child care problems.

'I think a lot of it's to do with children. It's not been easy even though I've only got one. I mean, some people have got four kids and they come in and I really shouldn't complain, but I mean, I did find it difficult. I still do, especially if she's not going to bed. [...] I think that generally it's the reason for dropping out kids, looking after the house and if you've got a husband, looking after your husband' (Michelle, interview)

Some women, like Lizzie and Morag had themselves previously left courses because of family pressures. The child related reasons the women gave for under achievement and 'dropping out' included; child ill-health, the lack of reliable or affordable childcare,⁸ the difficulty of making time to study at home and feelings of guilt. These are very real and understandable reasons but they are also worth considering in more depth.

Families with children are generally the poorest households and families consisting of a mother and child or children alone are the poorest of all (Oakley, 1994). I would argue that some of the women's problems had more to do with poverty than children. Smith and Noble (1995) have discussed the enervating effect of poverty which can drain women's emotional energy to the extent that they find it difficult to act. More than half the women in my study (eight out of fourteen) were lone parents. The majority of them were living on low incomes. As a result of this a number of the women lived in poor housing with dampness and inadequate heating. Throughout our conversations they referred to problems they were having with housing; Michelle was temporarily living with her parents, Lizzie was trying to get the council to re-house her; Cleo, Geraldine and Marilyn had moved flats within the last few months. Apart from the frustrations of these situations, their poor living conditions gave rise to a greater risk of illness for parent and children.

Lack of affordable or reliable childcare can also be linked to socio-economic factors. (Oakley and Mayall, 1996). Some of the women relied on friends and neighbours to look after their children when they were at college. Private childcare was not an option for them. Several of them had only been able to take up places on a substantial part-time course because they had managed to gain a place in the college nursery or at a nursery school (4).

The tensions felt by parent/students are similar to those felt by working mothers, (Brannen and Moss, 1988) but women often seemed less comfortable with being a student as opposed to a wage earner. Why might this be? I suggest that this may be because they are not immediately contributing to the family finances and because the activity may appear to be for themselves rather than for the family and is therefore seen to be 'selfish' (the concept of selfishness arose eleven times in five interviews with women from middle and working classes and across ethnic groups).

The women felt a tension between earning money now to give their children a reasonably comfortable life, or asking them to go without things now in order to build a better future. Morag described her feelings about this dilemma and how her current life as a student/mother contrasted with her life as a working mother.

‘It’s depressing I must admit. I think in the olden days we could just go out and buy things, but now you have to watch your pennies. I don’t think it’s very fair, it’s not fair on my son, but somehow you seem to manage don’t you? You pull all your resources together and you manage’ (Morag, interview)

The women found managing the practical and social pressures of being a parent-student stressful, particularly when their children were young. Lizzie, for example had found the competing demands of being a mother and student too much when she had six children at home.

‘It was hopeless because I had two young sons. I was divorced then, my sons were four and six and I found that it was just too demanding of me, so that then I couldn’t do my work at college enough because I had these long 3,000 word essays to write and I couldn’t look after them properly enough because they felt neglected even though they had four sisters at home who were older.[...] It came to the point at weekends that the boys kept knocking at my door “Mum, can’t you come with us to the park?” (Lizzie, interview)

She found that even if she arranged distractions for them neither she nor they felt good about it,

‘You feel so guilty because you were always copping out on them and giving them a treat and you were trying to think of treats because you felt guilty. You didn’t want them just to go to the park, you wanted them to go to the cinema and still it didn’t make it OK, they didn’t want that - having all these wonderful treats wasn’t a replacement for having you and to me my family are really important and they must come first. I didn’t want to feel that I was doing this teacher training and sort of shoving them to one side, that’s what I felt I was doing so I gave it up’ (Lizzie, interview)

It may be that students who are able to include their families in their out of college studies are better able to cope than those who separate their ‘worlds’ as I shall discuss later.

Patterns of involvement with work, children and education in women’s lives

I found that patterns of women’s involvement in education often followed their caring commitments.

‘I didn’t want to stay unoccupied, so I took a writing children’s stories course (one morning a week) for a year [...] it gave me time to take care of the kids and the house, particularly with the children adapting to a new school system [...] and I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with my life’ (Zandra, interview)

The difficulty of working as a lone parent also means that some women decide that college is a better option, especially if childcare is available. Geraldine left work in the circus because she thought the environment was dangerous for a young child. She started a course when her son went to school having found the training scheme workplace not flexible enough over work time, to allow her to take and collect her son from school. She is now on a substantial part-time course (although still experiencing some problems of fitting school start and finish with college times). Cleo, like Geraldine, found employers unsympathetic to lone working mothers,

‘My boss was making it increasingly difficult for me to work. I don’t know how I kept working, if it was up to him I would have given in, but I didn’t. I kept working. He tried every trick in the book because obviously when you have a child you can’t work every hour God sends. He wasn’t really interested in women with children, plus I was bringing him up on my own. That was pretty hard, but I’m glad I did it’ (Cleo, interview)

However it also made her re-assess her life in relation to her changed status as a mother.

‘I stuck at it and he couldn’t get rid of me, you know. At the same time I was thinking, I’ve really got to do something about it. I’ve got my son to think of. Not only do I want job satisfaction but I want a stabilised career, as it ever can be, and I knew that working in a shop wasn’t for me’ (Cleo, interview)

Cleo had been thinking of going to college for a long time: she had even seen careers advisers but had never taken the decision to leave her job and apply to college. When she was made redundant, she was delighted and was able to enrol on a course part way through the year.

Marilyn wanted to return to work after she had a child but found that the high cost of childcare and her low wage did not make this a viable option. She decided that when her child gained a place in a state nursery, that she would return to college part-time, gain qualifications and increase her career options. Morag chose to stay at home with her son until he was five and then started doing part-time courses and worked from home as a childminder. Six years and several courses later her son is going to secondary school and she has started a BTEC childcare course and is contemplating going on to university. She felt her duty was to give her child full attention in the early years,

‘I stayed at home and taught him how to read and I taught him how to write. I’ve had more enjoyment out of that than anyone will ever know’ (Morag, interview)

The combination of their experiences at college and caring for their children are part of most parent-students’ feelings of achievement and self-worth. Morag’s son has won a scholarship to

University College School. She is delighted, this is the achievement of a major learning goal for them both.

Trish's involvement with education is typical of many of the women in my study who dipped in and out of education according to changes in their circumstances. After her initial education she worked as a secretary and then decided to make a career change. She worked and attended college as a part-time evening student and then progressed to a more substantial part-time course.

'[...] then I had my daughter unexpectedly, and that sort of cut me off in my prime (laughing). I came back here (to college) when she was two years old and I put her in the college crèche and today I submitted my work to the Slade (for a degree course)' (Trish, interview)

For a number of the women, it has not been as straightforward as starting college part-time when their children started nursery, then moving on to higher education when their children became more independent. Moving house, more babies, divorce, all led to more complex life patterns and more pressures if they continued with their education. Lizzie went to FE college and did A level English part-time whilst also working part-time and bringing up six children. She went to teacher training college when her youngest children were four and six and dropped out after completing two terms of a four year course. It was not until her boys were a few years older that she felt able to pick up her studies again with a change of direction, from teaching to ceramics.

Petra started going to an Adult Education Institute (AEI) with a crèche when she had one young child. She gained GCE O level English and then took a break from education when she had another baby and as she described it 'got out of the habit'. She moved house. When her daughter started nursery she decided to go to another AEI to get her Maths 'O' level. While she was there she met a student who told her about Access courses. At the time of my interview with her she was on an Access Course at an FE college and had applied for university. As an adult learner she had been dipping in and out of education for fourteen years, fitting her studies around her family responsibilities. She had made the decision that it was now her moment to develop her career and had taken action to ensure that she has the freedom to pursue her goals,

' I'm going to do it full-time and there's no chance of having any more kids - I've sorted that problem!' (Petra, interview)

Two of the women told me that in order to have lives beyond motherhood, they had taken the decision to be sterilised. This is an indicator of how important their own learning and development was to them. It is also an indicator of their relationship with their partners, an issue to which I shall return.

What emerges from talking to the women is that what they want from education alters as a result of their involvement with the learning process and the changing demands and priorities in their family lives. This is supported by other research with adult learners including, McGivney (1993) and Coats (1996) The women's initial need was for easy access to a stimulating and friendly environment where they could develop self confidence and learn without the pressure of examinations. At a later stage they would be able to make use of progression routes into other courses which could give them qualifications and access to employment. In the final section of this study I shall argue that these pathways are reducing and that despite the rhetoric of expansion, there are now less opportunities for women to study, especially in the mode they themselves would choose, which fits with the reality of many of their lives as mothers and carers.

Parenthood and a change in perspective

Students told me that becoming mothers had changed their attitude to life and education. Trish described herself as more serious, responsible and mature; Morag said that she no longer 'messed about' in class, as she had previously done at school.,

'I've changed in the way that when I was at school I was the one that sat at the back and had a lark and a joke and had a great time and that was me; but now I'm completely different. I'm at the front going 'sh-sh-sh I'm trying to listen!' You know. I'm the one getting three distinctions on my course work, that's really, really good, so I've completely turned round and in a way I wish I'd done it then, I wouldn't be doing it now, things would be different [...] I'm having my time again and doing it right this time' (Morag, interview)

Even though they are positive about their second chance to gain an education this did not necessarily mean that the women wanted their children to follow their example,

'you have to be really careful with children because my daughter said to me at one point, because she wasn't doing too good at school, and I said something and she turned round and said "Oh well that's alright, when I grow up I can go to school like you" and I said "No you cannot. You can do it now (emphatically) the whole lesson you have to learn from me is not to do what I have done" (Petra, interview)

The experience of bringing up their own children had often led to a re-assessment of their lives and not only influenced their decision to return to education but also what they chose to study and the use to which they might put that learning in the future. During my interview with Floella it became clear that her decision to study psychology was linked to the traumatic experience of coping with her son's difficult adolescence and the positive effect that counselling had for them as a family. A deep motivation for her was to be able to help young black people cope with racism and to 'make a difference'; professional caring in the community growing from personal caring in the family, but still very much part of women's traditional role.

Petra was clear that her education is for herself, yet she conceded that her 'choice' of subject and career owed much to her experiences of being a parent, 'my children have helped me decide what I want to do' - which is teach.

WEAVING THE STRANDS TOGETHER

In the first section of this chapter I described how being parented had impacted on the lives of the women students in this study. In the second section I have described how becoming mothers had influenced the way in which women felt about themselves and the 'choices' they made about their own education. Returning to education often stimulates a personal re-assessment of an individual's achievements, abilities and aspirations. I shall now discuss the way in which the women in my study reflected on their own situations in relation to their mothers and link this with pressures on women more generally. I shall argue that for some of the women, the learning project relied on the co-operation of other members of the family: parents, partners, siblings and children and had the potential to develop into a family learning culture.

Mature students as mothers and daughters, changing the future?

As Oakley (1974) has suggested, motherhood changes a woman's sense of identity and each woman has to relate her self-image to her own cultural image of mothers. Perhaps becoming a parent helped the women in my study to break away from their child role within the family and

to question what their new role might be. Many talked of motherhood as a time when they reassessed their lives and considered a change of direction. Trish's comments were typical,

'I have changed over the past few years, I've matured. Because I've had my daughter I've changed' (Trish, interview)

Women students often talked about their own lives in relation to their mothers' lives. Education was seen as a way of giving them something more than a domestic role.

"My mum always stayed at home. My Dad always had full control over my mum and I looked at my mum and I thought, God I don't want to be like you (pause). I don't want to end up like this for the next twenty years" (Michelle, interview)

Michelle recognised that her mother is 'really intelligent' but had not had opportunities to develop her potential outside the home. Yet, it has been the very fact that her mother had not had paid employment, that has meant she had been available to help with child care and allow Michelle to achieve what she never did, a place at university.

It was important to many of the women, that their children had a different role model from that which their own mothers provided for them.

'This sounds rude, but when I was young my mother stayed at home to look after us, there were five children. When I got older she went out to work, but I remember with children at school their mums' had careers and it seemed - well in retrospect I want my daughter to know that I have a career and a life because when I look back at my mum, she was just a mum, it wasn't lack of respect, I know my mum could have had a career I suppose if she'd wanted to, but I want my daughter to be proud of me' (Trish, interview)

'When I was younger I just assumed, I don't know whether my daughter thinks the same of me, I assumed my mother was just there 100% for me and my brothers and sisters and I just assumed she was there and she belonged to us and although I'm there at home, I think that my daughter's aware that, she knows that I come to college 'cause she used to come with me (to the crèche) (pause) she knows that I'm doing something' (Trish, interview)

There may however be a tension between the type of role model that the individual women wanted to provide and their cultural 'norms'. For example, as previously discussed, recent discourses concerning British middle-class and working-class cultures have placed mothers at the centre of the family, responsible for the physical and moral well being of its members, placing their needs above her own. Afshar (1994) has discussed the central role that Muslim mothers play in ensuring the modesty, morality and hence reputation of their daughters and transmitting cultural identity to the next generation. However she points out in relation to Muslim women born in Britain,

‘the values that they are expected to transfer within minority groups are not necessarily those of Islam; they are a combination of cultural, customary and idealised views, learned through second-hand transmission by the young women born here, from older women born in a different epoch, in a different place and raised for a different life’ (Afshar, 1994:135).

In this way the concept of ‘mother’ is fractured according to class, ‘race’, religion and sexuality and is made more complex through individual and community histories (5). The women in my study were therefore working to become mothers and role models in part, through examining their feelings about their own mothers and their feelings about themselves as mothers and seeking to position themselves within a caring yet emancipated discourse.

The women also evaluated their lives in relation to their own children with whom some, like Morag, were sharing an educational journey. More than half the women were lone parents and it may be that they were sharing their experiences with their children, rather than with partners. Lizzie’s conversation drew continuous comparisons between her own initial education and that of her children; her parents’ attitude to her in her youth and now; her relationship with her adult daughters who are also students.

A new career or the ‘double shift?’

All the women talked about developing a ‘career’ rather than having ‘a job’ or being ‘just a mum’. The reality was that many of them had added another demand in their lives and now had two jobs, or in the case of those like Marilyn and Nadine who were students, part-time workers and mothers, three. Except for Zandra, who employed a cleaner, all the other women did housework and managed the family. The domestic role, especially that of caring for the children, remained firmly with them as it has with generations of women before them. (David, 1980; Purvis, 1991). Whilst the rhetoric of ‘choice’ appeared to offer them a different future life from that of their mothers, the discourse linking crime, truancy, poor performance in examinations (6) and other social ills with alleged poor parenting, pulled them back into the home.

During this century the state has sought to ensure more effective mothering through such initiatives as Infant and Child Welfare Centres (Dyhouse, 1978). There is a persistence of a social pathology model, as discussed in the first two chapters of this study, which identifies problems in society as moral issues rather than caused by poverty, with some groups in society

such as lone parents, being seen to be 'lacking' or 'problems'. Inadequate parenting, particularly mothering, has been a recurrent theme and a way of pushing women back into the home - maternal deprivation linked with adult deviance (Bowlby, 1951, 1965), speeches of Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s, media presentation of research which linked full-time working mothers with their children's academic failure (BBC Panorama, Feb. 1997; Guardian, 4.2.1997; Observer, 9.2.1997).

David, Davies, Edwards, Reay and Standing (1996) have discussed the effect of education markets on parents and the particular pressures this places on mothers in relation to choice and support of their children. They have correctly identified that discourses around parental involvement directly link children's success or failure with mother's actions. So, in the words of Oakley and Mayall (1996), 'Poor old mother'; women are being asked to solve problems caused by underfunding and the construction of environments too dangerous for children to use.

The women in my study were not only attempting to manage their own personal and career development, but contribute to that of their children in the context of the market - choices about which school to send them to, increased expectation of involvement with essential school functions such as listening to children read in the class room, accompanying children on school journeys, attending meetings at school, working with children at home with reading and mathematics schemes like PACT and IMPACT, (where parents regularly work at home with children on projects set and marked by teachers and parents and children comment on the activity) all on top of ensuring that children are fed and clothed. Coping as a parent-student is not only about managing all your different responsibilities, it is about managing your feelings about your roles and the expectations of others, as I shall develop in chapter 5.

Strategies to manage learning in the family

Edwards (1993) has suggested that coping strategies for parent-students seem to divide into women who separate family from college and those who make connections between them. A significant number of women in my study, often bringing up their children on their own, developed 'learning partnerships' with their families; sometimes their immediate family and sometimes with other relatives who were also mature students or sympathetic to the problems they faced trying to advance their own education and care for their children, which included supporting their education.

Some students, the ones with older children, told me that they did their homework together,

'We do our homework together at the table in the kitchen together [...] and when I come home from college each day we normally, well it's the way it's been, I say 'what did you do today?' and he says 'I'll tell you if you tell me what you did' [...] it's just the two of us alone in the house, we're very close. He looks at my books and folders and I look through his work to see that his writing is tidy and it's a mutual thing [...] we share and things like that and it helps as well I might say 'how do you spell so and so' and he says 'it's like this' or goes and gets the dictionary out, or what have you, so it's great, he's quite supportive and he understands as well the situation is not so good as it used to be (financially), thank goodness because it's not good it's bad.' (Morag, interview)

Others were able to find alternative ways of sharing the learning experience. Trish told me about the learning and enjoyment that painting and visiting art galleries together with her daughter had afforded both of them.

'From being a baby she's been with me everywhere and then I enjoy her response to my work (paintings) and just by looking at her work that she produces now I know that the paintings she's seen have had an effect on her, and they're fantastic and you know that what you've exposed them to has had an effect on their lives. I had never been to an art gallery until I was about twelve' (Trish, interview)

Children provided support for their mothers in a variety of different ways. Morag checked spellings with her son. Lizzie's children sold her craft work around shops and markets, Floella's son was a sounding board for ideas. Even though managing a family and returning to college was a struggle, all the women students who had children, told me how supportive their children were of them coming to college (the same can not be said of partners!) Morag told me about her son's reaction,

'He's thrilled! absolutely thrilled to bits [...] he said he'd noticed changes in me having gone back to college' (Morag, interview)

However, further questioning revealed some rather less 'idyllic' relationships. Having attained a position where the women now felt knowledgeable and confident enough to assist their children with their homework, some of the women found their help was not wanted Abimbola told me about two of her children who were preparing for GCSEs.

'They won't allow me to help them. They want to do it themselves. I don't know. I've talked to them about it and said "Look you're going to do the work, we're just discussing it", but they don't even want that' (Abimbola, interview)

Perhaps her own example of independent learning has influenced their attitudes, they have benefited from her inspiration and support over the years and now they need to demonstrate that they can achieve success through their own efforts.

Oakley (1994) describes the relationship between children and women as one of 'mutual dependence and interdependence and mutual oppression' (1994:19). She argues that because women and children live within a culture dominated by masculine power, patriarchal relations, they can be described as disadvantaged, social minority groups - oppressed. The meshing together of women and children in each others lives, has consequences for both women and children at both a personal and structural level. Much earlier, Firestone (1979) suggested that this embeddedness and the social position of women and children leads to mutual oppression - the rights of one group being set against those of the other.

In reality, these 'partnerships' between the women in my study and their children, were often uneasy alliances or collaborations based on personal interest, getting them to work sometimes relied on striking bargains or making rules. Some women separated out study and recreational family time, for example Michelle told me, 'I never work at week ends' (Michelle, interview).

Whatever involvement the women had directly with their children's learning they were setting a pattern, providing a role model which would influence their own children's attitudes to study.

Petra told me that her own children and their friends are staying on at school and planning to go to university.

'They are all staying on. It hasn't entered their conversation that they would leave. As far as he (her son) is concerned and as far as his group is concerned, they're staying on, that's what you do' (Petra, interview)

A different expectation of achievement and educational pattern has been set. This may be partly Petra's own influence, but must also be linked to wider social conditions including the reduced availability of work and government action to increase participation in post compulsory education and training. However, with the lack of adequate grants for FHE and the need for students to have other sources of income, be it student loan, part-time work or family support, we are returning to a time when some groups in the community will continue to find that education is for other people. If Petra secures a well paid job herself, this may make the difference for her own children.

In a number of cases it had been as Abimbola described,

'I've been pretty well studying all their lives [...] so they've never known me any different, but I think that my children are quite proud of me, although they'd never say it, (laughing). I feel that perhaps I have to provide some sort of role model for them both as a mother and

as a woman. I have to show them that just because you're a mother you're not just this faceless person who doesn't do anything' (Abimbola, interview)

It was important to the women that they were developing the culture of active learning in their families.

Whilst the women were variously positioned in relation to educational opportunities, they recognised that education and acquisition of qualifications was the way in which they and their families could accrue cultural capital and generate social profits.

The presence of computers and books in the home were symbols of this, although they had limited financial resources with which to acquire them Nadine told me,

'I always wanted to go back to college but somehow when I had my children it made it very, very important and I wanted them to grow up in that atmosphere of not being afraid of books, so that they're used to that environment and are used to it as they grow up' (Nadine, interview)

Both Nadine's children enjoy books: her six year old reads to his younger brother which delights her. Abimbola had not had many books in her home as a child, but her family had borrowed books regularly from the public library (a service now reducing in many areas). Her own home was now full of books but she recognised that this was not the situation for many local families,

'For some of my children's friends, the only books they have are the books they bring back from school, (at home they have) usually a bible and encyclopaedias which nobody ever looks at' (Abimbola, interview)

The ability to transform cultural capital into academic and social advantage relies on both personal commitment and material resources (Reay, 1997).

However, 'once a mother always a mother'. Although the women were attempting to assert their own needs, it was often the needs of others that they privileged. The women with grown up children still felt a sense of responsibility to put their children's needs before their own.

'I've had a bit of news recently that's made me feel I'll have to be very organised, because my daughter in America is suddenly having a baby and it is very inconvenient of her, but she's having it in May which is just before our exhibition and I know what she's like and I know there's no way I'll not have to go over there and be with her' (Lizzie, interview)

Lizzie had always put her family first. Even after her older children had married and moved away from home, and she had finally begun to build an independent life, she was prepared to put her family before her own hard won success (7).

Family support systems

With the exception of Michelle, Marilyn and Cleo, none of the women had extended family close by, nor lived in what could be described as established communities. All the students with children relied on support networks in order to manage their time. Cleo's mother or friends, looked after her son while she went out in the evening. Michelle's mum looked after her grand-daughter while Michelle went to college. Marilyn's parents looked after her son while she was at work in the evening, or studied at weekends. Lizzie relied on her older daughters to look after her younger sons.

'My children are all very helpful. They're used to helping each other. If I've had part-time jobs and been out, they've looked after the younger ones and cooked and been dependable'

'When I first said I was going back to college, they were all for it. "Go on Mum, you do it" (laughing) "Go on", you know even with my work now, when I've been trying to think of ways of selling it, they've all had their go at selling it around the shops, doing markets for me. They're very positive [...] I think if they weren't, I might not have so much confidence about it' (Lizzie, interview)

'To me saddled with a child, if I didn't have my boyfriend, I wouldn't bother to do college [...] like if me boyfriend can't pick me little boy up from school. I've got to leave here at ten past, twenty past two and go and get me little boy and put him in playcentre 'til half three, it's not worth it 'cos the college finishes at 4.00' (Geraldine, interview)

Most women said parents, especially mothers, were supportive but because contemporary families are fragmented, living in different parts of the country, they were often not available for childcare. However, some of the women said that their parents believed that mothers should be at home with young children and had been critical of their return to education at that time.

Learning in the extended family and its value to the community

The women in my study were continuing to learn from all the activities they were involved in - work, college, home. A number of students were also involved in activities which linked with

their parenting or career. These were often undertaken on a voluntary basis and were seen by them as their contribution to society, a way of making the world a better place for families. Current involvements included scout-leader training, (Morag) and voluntary work with an HIV/AIDS charity for young people (Cleo). Other activities that women students undertake includes: voluntary help with reading in school, being a school governor, jumble sales and fetes for cubs, playgroups, schools and their church. The confidence and skills they gain from their return to education can often result in women taking a lead on management committees and pressure groups. Similarly, parental involvement in pre-school activities can make a significant contribution to adult learning and personal development as well as benefit the children (McGivney, 1997).

What emerged from talking to the women was that, irrespective of their backgrounds, they had become part of a learning culture. In some cases they themselves had been encouraged to return to education by a close relative, in others they were actively encouraging family and friends to return to college as mature students. All the women with children were setting an example and supporting their own children in their learning - creating a culture of learning, where there were positive expectations of achievement (Ranson, 1994).

Geraldine had been encouraged to go to college by her boyfriend who was already a student. Floella's mother and sister had recently completed Access courses and gained degrees. Abimbola and Floella's sons had just started a Desk Top Publishing course at the same college as their mothers. Trish and Michelle had both encouraged their sisters to give up jobs to go to college. Marilyn and Cleo's mothers attended classes and gave their daughters encouragement and practical support,

'My mum is at college, she was going to college well before me.[....] She does counselling at the moment and she was doing needlework before and she was always saying to me, 'I thought you were going to do social work', she was saying to me she had all the information' (Cleo, interview).

The mutual support and encouragement the families gave each other was very important. In the majority of cases it was women supporting other women, sometimes across generations. Support was even given at a distance - Petra's sister lives in the north of England and also returned to college in the evening to improve her secretarial skills. Petra told me that they would telephone each other to ask how things were going and give moral support.

MALE PARTNERS' INFLUENCE ON THE CHOICES MADE BY WOMEN STUDENTS

Much feminist writing has focused on power relationships within the family, in an attempt to make visible the inequalities and to link struggles within the 'private' world, to wider social relations in the outside world. For example Oakley (1974) has written about the domestic division of labour, Hamner and Saunders (1983, 1984), Pahl (1985) and Maynard (1993) have discussed the often hidden issue of domestic violence, Morris (1990) household finance and decision making. Recent research has revealed the influence of power relations in the family in connection with women's ability to access education and training (McGivney, 1993), or manage their lives as students in Higher Education (Edwards, 1993).

As has already been described, their father's expectations and behaviour had strongly influenced the women's feelings about themselves and their ability to learn, not only in childhood but into adulthood. The attitudes of their partners similarly affected the women's achievement, even when they were not living together as a family.

At the time I interviewed the women in my study, six of them were living with partners, although the men were not necessarily the fathers of their children, and three women had split with partners after returning to college. By the end of my research another woman had separated from her partner.

Male partners as 'gate-keepers'

McGivney (1993) has discussed the way in which for many women with male partners, economic dependency combines with cultural attitudes and expectations to limit their access to education. Her research into the factors which assist or impede women's access, participation and progression within education and training, highlighted the 'gate-keeping' role that male partners often play in terms of heterosexual women's involvement in activities outside the home. She found,

'considerable evidence of male hostility to their partner's participation in education and training' (McGivney, 1993:4)

The opposition was found to manifest itself in a variety of forms and to affect women in all social classes. In my own study, male partners often had expectations of the women in terms of their domestic role within the home and were not necessarily able, or prepared to modify their expectations of them. Rather than supporting the women with coping with new demands of study, a number of the women told me that their partners accused them of neglecting their families, as I shall detail in the next chapter.

McGivney (1993) has suggested a strong link between marital strife and women's attempts to do things for themselves which were not connected with their family role. This, she believed, had led them to enrol on courses which were less threatening and more culturally acceptable and therefore likely to incur less opposition at home. In chapter 1, I described how feminist adult educators such as Keddie (1980) and Thompson (1980) have argued that the traditional curriculum of Local Authority adult education, 'house and body beautiful', confirms women in their domestic roles. The type of courses which have been available to women and which many still use as a first step back into education, are those which include childcare, cookery, crafts and keep fit. These are subjects that women feel they already have skills in, which gives them confidence to re-enter education, but as my research shows, may not necessarily be the beginning of a career in those subjects (8) and may be the vehicle for some women having more control in their lives - an act of resistance. Therefore, ultimately even the traditional domestic subjects can pose a threat to male partners and cause friction within relationships.

Domestic division of labour and financial resources

Petra's husband is Moroccan and she described herself as white working class. The family has had to accommodate different cultural attitudes to women's role. She believed that her husband is proud of her and sees education as an investment for the future. She did not believe that his attitude to her studies was typical of other local Muslim men,

'Surprisingly he's very good about it and I've talked to him a great deal about what will happen when I go to university and the pressure is on and he comes home and something's not done, then it's tough luck and he's going to have to put up with it and he's said don't worry I'm sure we'll work things out' (Petra, interview)

However, although he tends to cook for himself, because he comes home late most evenings, she still carries the major burden of caring for the family to his level of expectation,

‘I polish every day, I have to because my husband likes the house spotless.’ (Petra, interview)

She later described the most stressful time since becoming a mature student, and the closest she ever came to leaving the course, as looking after the family during Ramadan,

‘I was having to rush home from here (college) to prepare a meal because my children were fasting as well as my husband [...] and normally he doesn’t come back at four to eat so I was having to rush home from here, especially when I’d been here all day. Rush home from here and have a meal on the table for them, in between rushing to get my daughter from school as well and go back with her and prepare the meal and then there was that thing with him, once he’d eaten he’s in the house and normally he’d not come home ‘til eight o’clock [...] and he’d be under my feet because that’s normally the time that I do tidying up and he was there and it was like - “Oh go back to work or something” (laughing) I had a very stressful month.’ (Petra, interview)

What emerges, in line with Edwards (1993) findings, is that in many cases it is not that the male partner is taking on responsibility or additional share of housework, so much as ‘tolerating’ the fact that its completion may be delayed. Where the men undertake some domestic work, women often described it as ‘being helped’ or ‘I’m lucky’, which indicates that they still accepted it as their responsibility, even though they had taken on the commitment of studying. Nadine told me that she thinks her partner is supportive of her return to college because he had studied at university for two years. He now takes one of their children to school and cooks some evenings, but this was the result of her request and was described as ‘helping’ rather than sharing. This kind of support can be short term, or can require some kind of pay back.

It is not surprising that money caused tension within families in relation to women’s wish to return to college. What was perhaps more surprising, was the fact that non resident boyfriends and ex-partners were able to exert considerable pressure on some of the women. Morag was furious about her ex-husband’s attitude to her return to education,

‘Charlie’s dad, my ex-husband, he’s not pleased. He’s going back to do a degree somewhere, I don’t know where. He’s moaning about the fact that he’s working and having to pay for his own education himself whereas, this is what he says, I’m getting mine for nothing. He’s the only one that’s unhappy about it’ (Morag, interview)

Neither Morag or Lizzie’s husbands support their families and have said that they think that their wives should work as well as go to college - these women’s family responsibility is invisible and not considered by their partners to be a job in itself. Lizzie is living on Family Income Support and does low paid work at home for ‘cash in hand’ if she is running into debt.

'If the boys want to go on a school journey I just have to do odd bits of sewing until I've got the money, which is OK, it works out OK but it's at times like that I feel a little bit angry - why doesn't their father do something for them? They get away with it all so easily' (Lizzie, interview)

Lizzie states her motivation in returning to college to be,

'Me trying to be independent and not feeling that I needed somebody to support me' (Lizzie, interview).

She had in fact supported the family for years, when her husband went off on trips that lasted months and left her to work part-time and look after six children. As Oakley and Mayall (1996) have commented,

'Fathers are a problem. Where are they when it comes to the hard, routine labour of bringing up children? Where are the social policies that promote fatherhood and fathering?' (Oakley and Mayall, 1996)

Domestic violence and the family as a private space

Hamner and Saunders (1983, 1984); Pahl (1985) and Maynard (1993) have discussed the way in which society considers matters within the family, in particular the relationship between husband and wife, to be 'private'. They have described the way in which women are positioned within discourses which results in them being regarded and regarding themselves, as responsible for the maintenance and success of their relationships with men, even to the point of protecting the aggressor and taking responsibility for domestic violence upon themselves. Lizzie's words reveal how she repositioned herself as a result of her experience of abuse:

'You know how your parents tell you that when you get married, your husband takes care of everything and you don't have any worries and it's a joke, because they don't. It's a very old fashioned idea and I had a very old fashioned loyalty too, that I couldn't do anything about it and it must be my own fault and it took me several years to have the courage to get out of it. [...] You always think it must be something I've done. I had terrible guilt complexes. I don't feel like that any more. I just think what a pig he was. Going back to college was me saying "I can do this by myself. I can train for something - support myself" (Lizzie, interview).

Feminists such as Stanko (1994), have written about the need to make visible the violence that women experience in their lives. The negative male power which affected the lives and success of many of the women in my study, ranged between physical violence and indifference.

If asked a direct question about the attitude of their partners towards their studies, the majority of women in relationships, were very loyal and told me that their husbands or boyfriends were supportive. However, subsequent discussions often revealed feelings of frustration or tensions and some contradictions with earlier statements. Where relationships had already broken down, the women were forthcoming in their criticisms of their partners,

‘I had no self confidence at all. That’s what drove me to get a divorce in the end. I felt totally wretched that I didn’t even like myself and I lost my job because my husband harassed me at work. It was awful and I think that I had such low self-esteem then, that it took a long time to get rid of the guilt feelings, that it was all my fault [...] The last couple of years I’ve felt a much stronger person, I think that college has done that for me.’
(Lizzie, interview)

Lizzie was the only woman who actually detailed her experience of domestic violence, which not only resulted in physical pain, but intense mental distress. College was very much about re-creating herself after the loss of confidence and self-esteem that her abusive relationship brought about,

‘I don’t need anybody to tell me what I can and can’t do [...] I very much want to be myself’ (Lizzie, interview)

Sabotage, disinterest and psychological pressure: male attitudes to the ‘threat’ of education

Hopper and Osborn (1975) Johnston and Bailey (1984) and Smithers and Griffin (1986) amongst others, have suggested that where education has brought about an intellectual growth in women students which has not been shared by their partners, it has led to a re-evaluation of these relationships. Thompson (1983) comments that for many of the students she has taught, using feminist perspectives, the re-evaluation of personal relationships that accompanied study, helped some women to see the structural side of the relationship.

Although an unwillingness by male partners to take on domestic responsibilities might annoy them, it was lack of interest or routinised attempts to belittle their achievements which caused greatest resentment amongst the women in my study. Edwards (1993) has described similar findings in her research with mature, women students. Lovell (1980) has argued that some women are prevented from achieving their educational objectives by what she describes as ‘sabotage’ from their partners. Zandra was a qualified architect before she married a banker.

She had moved house (and country) four times in the last six years because of her husband's career. As a result, she had sacrificed her career (9). Each attempt to re-launch her career had been wrecked by another move. Finally, after taking some space to re-assess her situation, she decided to study for a qualification in fashion, but feared her husband's reaction,

'I didn't tell anyone. I thought that if I told my husband, or a friend, or anyone, I was going to be stopped in the middle of my tracks and I was afraid that my husband would not approve of the idea' (Zandra, interview).

Zandra told me that her husband said he was pleased that she was doing the course when he did find out, but their perceptions about why she is doing the course may not be the same - 'amusing' herself while the children are at school or starting a new career? Verbal statements of support can exist with other actions which undermine women's abilities to complete their courses. Zandra has found that attending an assertiveness course for women has helped her deal with conflicting messages and have more confidence in asserting her needs.

Adult educators frequently say that a significant proportion of marriages end in separation following a return by one partner to education (10). Perhaps one needs to question whether individuals turn to education because of problems within a relationship, or whether it is the return to education which causes problems in the relationship. Three of the women described their partners, or ex-partners, as feeling threatened by their return to education, which resulted in unsupportive or negative behaviour. Two had already separated when interviewed (Morag and Michelle) and another (Lorna) had by the end of the course.

When it became clear to Michelle that she had to make a choice between continuing her old life with her husband, or carrying on at college, she was clear what she wanted to do. She left her husband and continued her studies. This is by no means an unusual story. Marina, a college counsellor, told me about a student she had supported who had been too frightened to tell her husband that she was on a two year diploma course and had had to invent reasons for going back to college each term. Eventually she had told him what she was doing and he had gone overseas and refused to support her. This was a woman with many educational failures in her past who, un-supported by her partner, remained in Britain with several children and who with personal determination and support from college staff, completed her course. Edwards (1993) similarly cites cases of women in her study who separated from their partners after returning to study.

Lorna believed that her boyfriend, who was also a student, found it difficult to cope with her success. She told me,

‘I think he’s quite perturbed that I’m doing well. I think he finds it rather threatening’
(Lorna, interview)

She said that while she would go through his essays with him and try to make constructive points, he would refuse to read her work or would make a general criticism leaving her as she described it ‘up the wall’, upset and feeling let down. By the end of the course their relationship had ended. Combining comments about fathers’ and male partners’ negative attitudes to the women’s studies resulted in a frequency count of fifty five in nine interviews, which made it a very significant issue. It was not reported more by any particular group of women but cut across ‘race’ and class. But whilst the women’s experiences may have been similar and they were able to give each other mutual support, the personal and material resources each woman possessed to respond to her situation was different and linked to her social positioning.

The learning family or a challenge to domestic stability?

Edwards (1993) has discussed the dilemmas facing women students which affect their decisions about connecting or separating their experiences at university and home. It is probably inevitable that college will affect the home life whether it is in terms of a physical presence of books or art assignments; reduced time to do domestic chores; or the importation of new and sometimes contentious ideas. Whilst students may find the discussion of subjects such as equal opportunities challenging and sometimes stressful, it has been their decision to return to learning, their families have not made the same choice and do not have the same support available to them. It is therefore not surprising that these new ideas and practices are not always welcome in the home. They may be the direct result of the syllabus, as in the discussion of gender roles and stereotyping in childcare training, or it may be the result of students mixing with a different group of people from their usual social circle.

Bringing knowledge from the outside world into the home can also threaten the power balance between members of the family. Michelle’s husband had asserted that he had taught her everything she knew. The increased resources and ‘capital’ that she had gained through education gave her the potential for independence from him and some resistance to patriarchal

relations. For minority ethnic groups and working-classes, academic success also involves gaining the 'knowledge' of the dominant white middle-class culture. For example, the family expectations of some Muslim women in Britain are that they should,

'remain separate from the host society and to retain the identity that is so dear to the heart of the immigrant society' (Afshar, 1994:134)

Thus as students, Muslim women may have to interpret contradictory messages in terms of their behaviour and have to operate within the norms of two different cultures, with different realities at home and college. Afshar (1994) has stated that,

'they are expected to represent the immaculate face of Islam, which women in public places are not allowed to transgress. But since the mores of morality, modestly and transgression are so fluid, it is hard for most of them to comply at all times. In particular they are expected to maintain a respectful silence and not to protest on 'women's issues'. Feminism is viewed balefully as a main culprit for the derailment of minority honour; it is hailed as the ultimate weapon of the British middle-class hegemony and its most pernicious one where Muslim women are concerned' (Afshar, 1994:145).

The dominant culture intrudes from outside through education and work. Popular culture and the media also present norms and values which may be at odds with those advocated in some minority ethnic families (Afshar, 1994). Within the study, Petra (white) who had been brought up in a working class community and Lizzie (white) who had been brought up in an intellectual, middle-class family had both been married to Muslim men and had to operate within complex and sometimes conflicting sets of social norms.

Students may therefore have to cope with not only their own emotions in regard to their learning, but also the reactions of their families and communities. In my case study, childcare tutors told me that men have sometimes stopped their partners from attending sessions on topics such as domestic violence, child abuse, HIV and Aids. It is almost as if by discussing these topics, the women will become 'contaminated' and therefore need to be protected from them, the 'child-woman' having decisions made 'for her own good' (Oakley, 1994). Or is it perhaps that they may become knowledgeable and powerful? Certainly the numbers of women students who have disclosed personal information about domestic violence and sexual abuse during these sessions, indicate that some men have reason to feel uneasy. Staff have consequently built additional support for students into the course at this point, but what happens when they go home?

As childcare is a curriculum area which attracts women from a variety of different cultures and requires them to critically examine child-rearing practices and issues of race and gender, I asked the lecturers what the experience had been on their courses in terms of any domestic tension caused by the introduction of new ideas. Dawn believes that it causes very few students to leave her courses early, but often requires re-adjustment in their lives outside college,

'[...] more often than not, they change things in their life outside college to meet the new learning. We have a lot of evidence of that, we have quite a few women who move into battered wives accommodation while they're on the course and continue to get our support, who move out of violent or threatening relationships, into different ones or educate their partners into slightly different ways, not wholly I must say!' (Dawn, interview)

I would suggest that this is an indicator that the need for a change in their lives is extremely strong for many students; coming to college is far more than learning a subject or gaining a qualification, although these will hopefully be part of their new lives. It is important that this need is recognised and respected by both families and educators. A woman student on an Access to Humanities and Social Science course wrote in an essay about her experiences of returning to college,

'Perhaps the most difficult challenge I have come across in being a mature student, is gaining respect from my husband and peers. It has taken a long time for my husband to realise how important studying is to me. Because he never believed in education, he finds it hard to value it'. (Fiona, essay)

It could be argued that the children provided the opportunity to share and support that partners didn't - could this however be seen as an abuse of parental power? expecting more of children than could reasonably be expected?

The women in my study valued education. In some cases it was something that they had felt 'deprived' of for a considerable time. They equated education with personal fulfilment and life chance. It was a way to build a better future for themselves and for their children. Education would help them gain economic, linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985). Interestingly, Bourdieu's concept of 'capital' has recently been extended to include emotional capital which constitutes:

'knowledge, contacts and relations as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterised at least partly by affective ties' (Nowotny, 1981: 148)

Reay (1997) believes that emotional capital generates profits for families. She emphasises that whilst emotional involvement and emotional capital have a close and often overlapping relationship, they are not the same thing. She has argued that class and economic factors affect mothers' ability to 'divert their emotional involvement into generating academic profits for their children' (Reay, 1997:4). As a result of returning to education, the women in my study gained the 'language' to negotiate with health and education professionals on behalf of their children and the confidence to use it. They became confident in their knowledge and analytical abilities and felt able to help their children with homework. They supported their children in dealing with the stresses and strains of everyday life. However, as Reay also found in her research, this was at a cost to the mothers in terms of time and emotional energy. Whereas the middle class mothers could 'buy time' by purchasing convenience foods, paying for domestic help and childcare, working class mothers were having to provide support with more limited resources - their ability to develop emotional capital was reduced. Reay also comments on the cost to children in terms of reduced freedom and opportunities to play, for those children aspiring to succeed academically in competition with others. It is beyond the scope of this study to extend discussion of this point however, it brings the discussion back to the women's own childhoods and their experiences of being parented and how this affected their attitudes to their own and their children's education. The amount of time and emotional energy they felt the need to expend on their children in the present, had to be balanced with family gains in the future, as I shall discuss further in the next chapter.

Conclusions and issues for policy makers

This chapter has revealed the practical and emotional impact of families on women returning to education. It has discussed a selection of the key concerns of women students, which emerged from analysis of their conversations with me. The themes and emphases reflect their interests but also raise important issues which need to be addressed by policy makers and highlight the need for further research. In conclusion, I will now draw out aspects arising from the data which I believe to have the most significant policy implications.

There is generally an assumption that parents have a major influence on the learning experiences of children and young people. Consequently, researchers have often interviewed parents of school children and discussed parental influence with young people entering FE

(Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Reay, 1998a). The negative effects of initial education on individuals who may as a result not wish to return to education in adulthood, or have low confidence as learners, has also been well researched (McGivney, 1990; Uden., 1996; NAGCELL, 1997). However, the terms 'adult' or 'mature' student may perhaps suggest that those people who return to education in their twenties and beyond, are autonomous and independent learners. My research has revealed the continuing influence that parents exert over adult students and the ways in which this affects the choices they make and the feelings they have about themselves. This is new and significant information and needs to be considered in relation to the types of support which are provided by colleges for their adult students, which often focus more on academic skills or welfare support, than on psychological aspects of learning. It also raises questions about the effect that parents have on the classroom relationships between adult students and their lecturers and the consequences that this may have for teaching and learning. This is worthy of further research, as is another previously hidden but important issue which is the incidence and effect of sexual abuse in childhood and domestic violence in adulthood, on mature students' learning and achievements. The indications from my research are that this is far more widespread than is recognised and is an issue which needs to be addressed by educational and social policies which reach beyond child-protection in nurseries and schools.

Thirteen of the fourteen women in this study were actively involved in learning within a family context (the twelve mothers with their children, two women with their male partners who were also students and three women with mothers or sisters). This involvement which cut across issues of 'race' and class, included practical, educational and emotional work and can be seen as part of a 'traditional' female discourse of caring. This raises the question as to how far these women were empowering themselves through education and to what extent they were involved in the transmission of values which sustain and perpetuate gender, 'racial' and social-class inequalities. The choices the women made about the way they 'mothered' their children were influenced by their often critical feelings about their own mother's actions, how far were they creating new opportunities and re-positioning themselves within oppressive discourses?

The women's differential access to both economic and cultural resources, affected not only their relationship to knowledge but also their ability to deal with external agencies, such as the council housing department, which impacted on the practical aspects of being a student. There is clearly a need for policies at national and local levels to recognise not only the impact of

economic factors on an individual's ability to access educational opportunities, but also the psychological barriers to access and achievement which result from the way they experience the intersections of gender, class and 'race'.

The feelings that the women expressed about their responsibilities as mothers clearly reveals the tension that they feel between caring for their children themselves throughout the day and sending them to a childminder, nursery or after school club. Whilst it is important that governments take action to ensure the provision of sufficient good quality, affordable childcare to allow women to return to college or gain paid employment, they also need to consider the contradictory messages within other ministerial statements which emphasise the key role that parents (mothers) have to play in supporting learning within the home and raising the level of children's academic achievement (Charles Clark M.P., Family Learning Day launch, 10th Sept. 1998).

It is clear from the women's accounts of their motivations for returning to education and the ways in which they fitted the demands of home and study into their lives, that there is a need for a national system which accredits small chunks of learning and can accommodate 'learning breaks'. It is also clear that there is a need for a broader definition of 'learning outcome'. The new Labour government has recognised the role education plays in strengthening the family, the neighbourhood and the nation (DfEE, 1998) in its green paper on The Learning Age. Yet the education which is to be funded through the public purse has a vocational bias. It is significant that a number of the women in my study used their learning not only to enhance family life, but as a positive contribution to their communities. These women who had often 'failed' by government standards because they had previously left courses before the end, had in many cases succeeded in their own terms and were using their 'really useful knowledge' to improve the quality of the lives of people within their communities through voluntary work. It is ironic that the government is now investing in research into what it terms 'capacity building', in order to develop policies to regenerate depressed areas (conversation with Karen Buck M.P., 23rd November, 1998). There is a need to research further the role played by women in this context and to re-consider the way in which different forms of adult education are funded and their outcomes measured.

Thus, the experiences of women FE students in my study, reveal the variety of their lives and the way in which education and social policy in general, seems to take no account of their

concerns and the complex patterns of their lives. The consequences of this for colleges and for the students themselves, will be discussed in what follows.

NOTES

1. The FEFC funding methodology sets out the amount of units which can be claimed for particular courses. If colleges provide more tuition or support beyond this amount, they can not claim additional funds. Students needed to prove that they are not studying full-time (i.e. more than 16 hours per week) and were actively seeking work, in order to receive the Job Seekers Allowance.
2. Discussion between Veronica McGivney and Eileen Aird, former principal of Hillcroft Women's Residential College suggests that the impact of childhood abuse on learning throughout life is an important and under researched area.
3. The Family Workshop referred to was part of an initiative by the Inner London Education Authority which provided classes for parents and children where they could learn together (sometimes the same and sometimes different activities). Crèches were also provided for babies.
4. There is some FEFC funding available for childcare but it does not cover the full cost of the service.
5. Trish and Michelle are both white, working-class with white, working-class male partners but had been brought up in different communities. Trish in the north of England and Michelle in London. Floella and Abimbola are first generation black British of African parents and both had black partners. Lizzie comes from a middle-class background outside Britain and Petra from a working-class background in the north of England both women are white with Muslim partners and mixed-race children. Marilyn and Nadine are both second generation black British women with Caribbean roots. Both women had black partners and children. Cleo is mixed-race. Zandra is black Haitian with a white husband.
6. At the time of writing (February 1997) there was much media discussion of a BBC Panorama programme which used the research of Professor Margaret O'Brien, on families in Barking and Dagenham, to suggest a link between full-time working mothers and their children's poor examination performance. The role of fathers was ignored.
7. The family team succeeded in producing a baby and the exhibition, with Lizzie flying to America to help with the birth of her grandson and her other children organising her exhibition in her absence.
8. Several of the women in my study had studied one subject when they had returned to education as mature students (often non certificated) e.g. crafts (Lizzie and Abimbola) writing and illustrating children's books (Zandra), but had then moved on to other courses psychology (Abimbola) assertiveness for women and Access in Fashion (Zandra). Student transfer records and progression data in the case study college reveal that a significant number of students change direction.
9. Architecture has become an extremely competitive profession. The building industry is male dominated and requires time spent networking and in site meetings during hours which suit the client. In addition to this every country has its own building regulations which need to be learnt.
10. Discussion with adult educators (NIACE women's conference 1997) suggest that a significant number of students separate from their partners, however statistics do not appear to be available.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN, TIME AND LIFE-CHANGE

Women's sense of themselves affects their ability to allocate physical and psychic time to their different roles within the family and at college, and to bring about life-change. In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which external expectations, standards and 'normalising' processes, circumscribed the behaviour and feelings of the women in my study. I will show how these ideas about the role of women, conflicted or converged with the women's internalised self-concepts, values and attitudes and how this is expressed by them in terms of their feelings and the choices they make. In particular, I shall consider mature women students' experience of returning to education in relation to personal growth, change and empowerment and reveal the influence of discourses which were identified in chapter 1.

FEELINGS

How mature women students describe themselves

The majority of the women I interviewed described themselves and their achievements in terms of what they did not have, or could not do, rather than in a positive way.

'I came to college because there wasn't really any other option, because I hadn't qualifications from school and I hadn't worked and I didn't feel I had anything to offer anyone to pay me for' (Lorna, interview)

Their lack of marketable skills and self confidence were issues that they often referred to and looked to the college to help them address. (Lack of confidence was mentioned fifty six times within ten interviews). In some cases, such as Lizzie, they felt that they had been de-skilled and had had their confidence eroded by life. There was a common belief that they had under-developed skills and that this was the right moment to make a change. Mallia's research on mature women students in FE (1997), similarly found that their decision to seek a new career

often linked with a significant moment, an alteration in their personal circumstances, what she refers to as an 'epiphany' (Mallia, 1997:1) in their lives (1).

For many of the women in my study, motherhood had changed their lives and absorbed their energy and time: their roles as mothers and carers were strong facets of their identity. In their brief descriptions of their lives and achievements the women with children often talked about themselves in what appeared to be self-deprecating ways 'I'm a single mother' (Michelle) 'just a housewife', 'I've been doing nothing since he (her son) was born' (Petra) 'there's not much more to tell about me really - nothing interesting at all' (Michelle). It could be argued that this was their attempt to normalise themselves, or to establish a hierarchy within the interview with an academic researcher, but this is also the way that receptionists, guidance and admissions tutors in the case study college say that many women applicants present themselves. It is the articulation of their position in society - they have low status as mothers, their contribution to the economy through un-waged labour in the home is not valued.

'Being a mother, it has no status, you have to make that status for yourself and you have to keep reminding yourself what an important job you are doing. This is my experience, nobody else recognises the importance of this as a job [...] I am sure that no one (woman) negates what they do with their children, but its not considered to be a high powered job, you don't get paid for it for a start and in this society something is only worthwhile if you get paid for it' (Abimbola, interview)

Abimbola is a black African woman who was brought up in Britain. Did she think that the low status of mothers was culturally specific?

'Being a mother in Africa gives you status, having children gives you status but whether women are better off in that kind of environment is debatable, because ultimately the whole world is geared towards men, no matter what culture you come from you're always on the second rung, whether you're a mother, working, or whatever [...] In African cultures perhaps you do get more status for being a mother because if you've not got children, you're not a real woman, but whether that's beneficial or not, I don't know'

For those students who are lone mothers and in receipt of state benefits there is the additional stigma of being seen as a 'drain on the public purse'.

Feelings about being a 'single parent'

I never asked any of the women a direct question about their marital status, five of them however, described themselves as single parents. All of them had strong feelings about their status as single parents. Trish's comments were typical of the women who were bringing up children on their own:

'I'm a single parent and I get housing benefit and I'm in a housing association flat. I seem to have been put into a mould of women who are being victimised at the moment and making a choice about having a child and then - and I feel that and obviously I'm part of that group and I feel that not everyone you know, we all deserve to be treated as individuals, everybody makes choices in their lives [...] I want to look after my own needs. I don't want to be in a situation where I'm relying on the Welfare State (embarrassed laugh) and its probably purely snobby anyway because I don't want to be put with a group of people who are in that category and don't want to do anything about it because I'm not like them and I don't want to be put in that group with them and I know I can make a decent living and I want to go and do it' (Trish, interview)

The right wing discourse which presents single mothers as feckless women scrounging off the state, linked with a crisis of morals and the break up of the family, can be seen to have become partly internalised by some of the women (Foucault, 1977) despite their personal experiences of being lone parents and their distress at the treatment that has been meted out to them because of their status. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) have commented on the way that the association of desert with motivation has contributed to a modern discourse (similar to the Victorian notion of the deserving and undeserving poor), which divides the working classes into those who are categorised as hard working, respectable and aspiring towards self-improvement and those who are lazy, feckless scroungers off the Welfare State. Single parents are conflated into this second group of 'undeserving poor', women who expect the state to house them and keep them, whose children are deprived of a 'proper family upbringing' and who are more likely to under-achieve at school, truant and require extra public resources. In my research, Michelle's father accuses her of 'poncing off the state' and she and the other lone mothers are forceful in the expression of their desire to distance themselves from the undeserving group. Although they were obviously unhappy with this stereotype in terms of their own lives, they made no attempt to challenge it as a socially constructed concept; rather they attempted to distance themselves from it - they accepted that this was how single parents were, but they were not like this themselves. Michelle suggested that many single mothers sit at home feeling sorry for themselves,

'I think a lot of people dwell on the fact 'Oh I've got no money'. I'm a single parent. I'm not up for that crap. Get up and do something, there's no point in moping about it getting depressed about your situation. I don't particularly class myself as a single parent, I know that they are not really that favoured. I just say I'm a student' (Michelle, interview)

Yet according to national research for the Department of Social Security (DSS), 90% of lone parents want to return to work. Many have difficulty getting the practical information on childcare, in-work benefits, grants and training opportunities (NIACE, 1996).

Lizzie alone expressed a view of the injustice of a society which chastises women for being lone parents rather than the men who have abandoned them.

'They (men) get away with it so easily and it's your fault, you know, you shouldn't have had children. If you complain about it, that's the sort of answer you get, so it's best not to say anything. [...] The people at the Social Security are awful they make you feel guilty. People at the council, when I asked for a flat exchange because ours is so horrible and damp said, "You can't just come here and tell us what you want - you unmarried mothers". I said "I was married once actually" and I was made to feel guilty and I wonder why, and they've told me about these homeless people and I'm lucky to have a flat. So I go home and I think (sarcastically) yeah, I'm lucky' (Lizzie, interview)

In this way lone mothers from a wide spectrum of cultures, in all their different circumstances are 'operating within contexts characterised by structural and moral constraints' (David et al 1996:213) and whilst every woman I interviewed had a different personal history, there were aspects of their experiences which were shared and linked with the experiences of women more widely.

Women's multiple roles and emotional work within the family

Being a mother was only one aspect of the life of the women, (twelve of the fourteen women had children). They had relationships with other family members and friends; a few had part time paid employment; they were students. How did they separate or combine and make sense of the different demands that these roles and relationships made of them?

In chapter 1, I discussed long-standing discourses which have placed women at the centre of the family, responsible for the physical and emotional well being of others, placing others' needs above their own. A number of the women in the study had not been able to concentrate on their own school education, or careers, because of the expectations on them as daughters within the family. For example, Michelle's mother suffered from mental health problems and

so as the oldest daughter, she took on some of the domestic work, but also assumed the emotional work of keeping the family together,

‘She had a mental illness, she was manic depressive and at the time it was really difficult (pause) she was having a difficult time so she relied on me a lot because I’ve got younger brothers and sisters and I was trying to keep them together’ (Michelle, interview)

In this case, keeping the family together may have also meant avoiding the children being split up and put into care by Social Services.

Whatever their domestic roles and responsibilities as children, all the women assumed the main responsibility of caring for and managing the family in adulthood, a key aspect of which was emotional support. Edwards (1993) has noted the imbalance between the sexes regarding who gives and receives time, attention and emotional support.

‘Many women appear to see the giving of time as an end in itself, a symbol of caring’ (Edwards, 1993:69).

Making time for their studies, especially at home, was a particular problem for the women in my research, as I shall now discuss.

BEATING TIME

‘This is something that I totally never thought I would ever do because at forty three, you know, if you haven’t done them by now, there are things that you will never do. So its an adventure’ (Floella, interview)

Age a factor in how women see themselves

Their age and the passing of time, were issues to which many of the women in my study constantly referred. For physical and socially constructed reasons, ageing is differently experienced by men and women. Although men age and suffer from ageism, their education and careers are seldom interrupted by time given over to caring for others in the home. Men are not as time restricted as women in terms of their ability to become parents, their fertility persisting often into old age. Within contemporary western society, it is the culture of youth which is valued (Gutman, 1987), with advertising and the media constantly reminding women

of the need to defy the natural process of ageing, to seek to appear youthful and sexually attractive (Maguire, 1995). Whilst men gain social standing, regardless of age, according to the status of their employment (Itzin, 1990), women's status is often linked with their roles as wives and mothers. Although none of the women in my study would describe themselves as 'old', they had an awareness of age which was often linked to what they had, or had not, achieved in terms of qualifications, employment and childrearing. For some women, personal pride in their achievements as mothers, was modified by their need for wider recognition of their abilities beyond the domestic sphere.

'I was working as a childminder for three years before I joined this course [...] I just woke up one day and thought, there must be more to life than this and you know there must be, this is the most unstimulating job on earth, so I thought, I've got to get out there and do something, you know, time is creeping as they say. This is when I came back to college this time' (Morag, interview)

The need to 'do something' with their lives, while there was still time, was mentioned by many of the women, not only the older ones:

'I came to see *The Age of Reason* (college production) and I thought, Oh God, what am I doing, where am I going, I'm not really doing very much. I was working, but I was very unhappy. I just didn't feel fulfilled and what I really wanted to do was a degree, but I was put off to begin with by thinking, oh no it's too late. I'm nearly twenty five, I should have done this ages ago' (Nicola, interview)

For Nicola, who was not a mother, there was the feeling that her friends had degrees and good jobs and she was being left behind, that by going back to college 'later' in life (although she was only 24) she was deviating from the 'norm'. As Edwards (1993) has pointed out the ethos of HE in particular, has favoured the experiences and lifestyle of the post school 'white, middle-class bachelor boy student' (Edwards, 1993:86). In common with many of the other women, Nicola had reached a 'last minute desperation' with the fears that her ability to learn was diminishing with age and that opportunities to start a new career were reducing by the day. As Weiner and Maguire (1995:226) have argued, 'no age is the right age for a woman'. She is either 'lacking experience and authority' or no longer 'young and bright'.

Lizzie's concerns about returning to college in her forties, related to studying with younger people. She was also aware, as were a number of the women, that job opportunities were reducing particularly for older people and that starting their new careers later in life might limit how far they could progress, that age and sex would combine to limit their futures.

The very closeness to their children's development and education, brought many of the women's own achievements and status to the fore, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Some women saw not only their friends, but also their children, leaving them behind both in the sense of growing up and becoming independent, and in terms of gaining qualifications. The need for the women to develop themselves was driven by a wish to improve their own self esteem and to have their achievements recognised by others within and outside the family.

It needs to be recognised that age has meanings attached to it not only in terms of gender, but also culture. Abimbola believed that in African cultures people gain status with age,

‘In my culture older people get a lot of respect. You have to respect older people, simply because they are older than you’ (Abimbola, interview)

The women interviewed in my study were between 21 and 45 years old. Older women (over fifties), do not represent as high a proportion of the student population in the New FE as they do across the full spectrum of adult learning opportunities (2). The emphasis on vocationalism and qualifications, does not especially meet their educational or social needs. It may also be that older women are less likely to meet course selection criteria, either because they have been out of education for some time, or because of ageism within the education system.

Women as managers of time and complexity

Time was also a factor in terms of immediate concerns, with time availability and time management, seen to be important issues by students and lecturers alike. Lack of time is one of the most frequent reasons given by students for leaving courses (McGivney, 1996), but what might this really mean? Woodly, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton and Fulton (1987) have suggested that it may be an acceptable way for students to rationalise their lack of ability or effort, protecting their status and self esteem by attributing their withdrawal from a course to an external factor. Morrison (1992) suggests that the converse may also be true, that colleges' view of 'time well spent', may be based on outcomes such as qualifications and that for students early leaving may mean a change of priority or achievement of personal learning goals. The way that women students allocate time to the different aspects of their lives is highly

complex and, as has been discussed by Edwards (1993), has a great deal to do with their feelings about themselves and their roles and the assumptions of others at home and college.

As Morrison (1992) has pointed out, in modern Western society, time has acquired a scarcity of commodity value. 'Time' is literally 'money' with individuals and businesses (including education businesses), increasingly focused on ways of organising time to achieve maximum benefit. For the women in my research, becoming a student had financial implications beyond the cost of the course. Time at college meant time not earning money, perhaps over a long period, if they progressed to HE.

The 'timing' of returning to college was also crucial. When would they best be able to manage financially and practically and cause least hardship to other members of the family?

'I saw my chance. This was precise timing indeed. Not only did I feel free to leave my full time employment but my son had grown up, and there were no grandchildren! I would take this opportunity. I made the decision to return to education' (Floella, essay)

In Floella's statement we see not only her concern to fit her return to education around her immediate family needs, but to time it around the possible future demands of being a grandmother and the consequent expectations of her in this role within her community (black African/British).

Time spent studying also meant time not saving money. None of the women had much money, in fact most of them were living on state benefit, augmented by part time work which was often 'off the books' (financial problems were mentioned twenty eight times in eight interviews). One of the women remarked to me 'you can't get the bargains down the market if you're in college' It was not possible for the majority of these women to create time by paying for childcare, taking taxis, or buying ready prepared meals.

The predictions that women would have increased leisure time with the growth of labour saving devices in the home, have been overtaken by changes in work patterns, particularly the increasing feminisation of the part-time work force, male unemployment, loss of union power and deregulation of working hours (Witz, 1993). These changes have impacted at the same time as reductions in resources for health and social care, with additional burdens falling on women at home. Many women have found themselves juggling their time between part-time employment, family care responsibilities and in the case of the students in my study, education.

If the working day and the working week have become more flexible, then it has been women who have managed time to enable this to happen, yet their skills as managers of complex and fragmented time have not been recognised and valued (3).

As Morrison (1992) points out, education has traditionally organised time into rational, linear schedules. Colleges expect part-time students to be able to compartmentalise the other parts of their lives with similar ease. In the past, the majority of students in further and higher education were young people continuing their education post school; now the majority of students are adult (McGivney, 1996). The pressure on educational establishments now is to ensure the maximum output for the minimum input (as I shall expand in chapter 6). The pressure is therefore on students to compact their learning into as short a timescale as possible (4). However, the preferred learning style for many women students (described in chapter 4) was dipping in and out of college, fitting study around the demands of their families and jobs.

More part time and modular courses are being introduced, with students expected to complete a significant proportion of their studies outside the classroom, often at home. Brockett and Hiemestra (1991: 37 - 83) describe the result as the 'iceberg model', with attendance at college, the visible aspect, but with the larger portion of scheduling and carrying out private study made the responsibility of the student. My research, like Morrison's, (1992) exposes the complex relationship between women and part-time education at the centre of which, are the roles which women play within the family. In both my own study and that of Morrison, it was clear that women's time is often circumscribed by the time dimensions of the other members of the family. Typically, women described home study as working late at night or early in the morning, after they had finished servicing the demands of others. Petra told me how her son does his homework on the kitchen table after the evening meal and she does her course work after the children have gone to bed, or in the early hours of the morning. However, this arrangement is not without problems,

'the computer is in my children's bedroom, unfortunately, so they're down stairs watching television or doing their own thing and I'm working away on the computer and they say "Mum, please we want to go to bed because we've got school tomorrow" and so they kick me out and then I can't get on with it and I have to write everything by hand if I have to make sure it's completed the next day, so yeah, I'm well organised' (Petra, interview)

Finding adequate amounts of quiet time to think and write was often a problem, particularly for students living in small flats with children around.

'The children do not realise that you also need time, that's the problem. If I say to the children, "I'm doing my homework, go and do your own things for a while", they come to see what I'm doing and borrow my crayons and things, so it makes it very difficult. It's always easier for me when they are in bed' (Zandra, interview)

'It's pretty awful. It's like last night, I managed to get him into my bedroom and he can put the telly on in there and I thought, yes and I actually picked up a sociology book I was reading and then he came back in again hassling me and I found that so distracting. I need to be on my own and quiet and think, that's the thing (Cleo, interview)

It may be that some types of course, particularly those that do not rely on a great deal of written work, are easier to fit around, or combine with family interests, while children are young.

'When I have to write I don't like anybody annoying me, it distracts you dunnit? but I can do me practical. Me practical's fine, but I make sure I do my writing when my little boy's in bed and me man's probably lying down watching telly, something like that so I'm not getting disturbed in any way' (Geraldine, interview)

Geraldine who is studying hairdressing and Trish who is studying Art and Design, both described activities such as dressing a hair block or painting, which they could do with their children around, but they also needed quiet study time too.

Although the majority (eight) of women students in my study were lone mothers, all the women with children saw themselves as responsible for arranging meals, laundry, childcare and journeys between school, playcentre and home. This is supported by feminist researchers including Davies (1989), Morrison (1992) and Edwards (1993) who have identified the key co-ordination role that women play in the management of family activities, which is hugely time consuming and yet has frequently been ignored. If arrangements collapsed, the women took responsibility and their own projects were put on one side, including studying. Tutors interviewed for this study also commented on how often women students missed classes, or arrived late, because of family illness and visits to school.

Routines

Women often talked about routines, (thirty two times in twelve interviews) and some even achieved a pattern (although often for only a while) of domestic and study activity:

'I make sure everyone has breakfast before leaving the house; then I get dressed, do a few things like going to the bank or the shops, come to college, pick up the children from school, do some errands, cook dinner, send everyone to bed and then I do my homework, if I have the energy' (Zandra, interview)

'I make sure my daughter's in bed by about half seven and I know I've got about two hours when I'm alert and I work until about half nine. Sometimes I get up early before she wakes up [...] I sort of work around her' (Trish, interview)

'I'm quite strict about what time they go to bed' (Nadine, interview)

However, the experience of many women, including the majority I spoke with during my research, was that their time was that which is left over after every other member of the family has had their own needs satisfied.

'Ever since I had the children my time is the scraps that are left over' (Zandra, interview)

Not only was that time often limited, it came in blocks of unpredictable length at odd moments of the day or night. Morrison (1992) also found that the women in her study did their college work late at night and were at pains to ensure that collective family time was not threatened, which usually meant strategies such as getting up earlier to do housework.

'Sometimes I come back from college and it's all fresh in my mind and I really want to do something but I can't, that time is for them' (Nadine, interview)

'She won't go to bed at a certain time. Its trying to get back into a routine. I'm not here (college) on a Monday and a Friday and I spend my days at my Mum's house working through the day and generally when she's in bed I'll look at stuff, but I don't work (study) at weekends' (Michelle, interview)

Michelle, like many students, believed that if she could get into a routine, she would be able to cope with the volume of college work. However, what emerges from our conversation is that her ability to find space relied to a great degree upon her own mother taking on the responsibility for her grandchild and giving her daughter study time. Michelle reserved the time at weekends to be with her child herself.

Study plans and routines assume control over time. Yet women in families have been shown to have reduced control over the way their time is spent (Deem, 1986; Millar and Glendinning, 1989). As Edwards (1993) argues, study and family responsibilities are both task, rather than clock related; there is no set amount of time that can be planned for their fulfilment. The availability and extent of time is therefore difficult to predict and control. Nevertheless, twelve

of the fourteen students in my study, talked about trying to establish patterns and allocate specific times for home study, mirroring the wider concerns with time schedules in society.

Even when time was available, some of the women found it difficult to do their college work,

'I do anything but do homework. I leave it to the last minute, you know, find any excuse to stop and that can lead to feeling tired and stressed out. I've found that when I have done that thing of staying up all night to work, I have felt physically ill afterwards - like my skin reacts and I get looking really rough, really rough, so it doesn't pay. [...] I generally do work under pressure you see. Near the deadline I say 'Oh God' [...] I'm hoping to plan it better 'cos this is ridiculous, I can't carry on like that' (Cleo, interview)

The complexity of the women's lives and the fragility of the routines that they came to rely upon, meant that they constantly needed to maintain and modify their 'system', re-arranging their own lives to fit the changing needs of others. As I described in chapter 4, moving house and the knock on effects such as children changing schools, were often cited as problematic and the most disruptive of physical and mental energies. Geraldine described the problems she was having with schools and housing, as the worst things that had happened to her since coming to college:

'I've been taking time off recently and trying to get into college, but having problems. It's like, I've got to get me child into another school. I can't keep him going to this school so it's like I've been having days off college. I haven't sorted m'self out yet, properly [...] If I go to school from Camden I've got a fifteen minute walk and then I've got to get here, that's another twenty minute walk, so you really need a car' (Geraldine, interview)

Buying cars, taking taxis and paying for other support services were not options for the majority of the women I interviewed.

'Lost time' in their studies was difficult to make up. Partly this was because of the lack of flexibility within the college and partly this was because the women simply could not make any more time in their lives to catch up. There was also embarrassment about having missed course time and failed to behave in the way expected by the institution. Dealing with the college could be as daunting as doing the work itself,

'Sometimes it's things outside your power that happen. It's like moving, especially with a three year old son. I had loads of stuff and I had to get the place sorted out on my own and I missed out on college and if you miss out on a day or two, well I think that's it, I can't go back' (Cleo, interview)

Overlapping and simultaneous activities

The time diaries which Morrison (1992) encouraged her student to keep to log all the activities in which they were involved over particular periods, revealed that although her students' main activity might be home study, in fact the time they spent on it was punctuated by sub-activities such as feeding the cat, emptying the washing machine or helping children with their homework. Similarly, the students I talked to described a blurring of study and family activities. Finding time to study may not mean dropping other activities so much as 'doubling up'. This may of course result in exhaustion or poorer quality of attention in all spheres.

Edwards (1993) found that study intruded into the family life of students in HE, in a way that work never had; they had not had to bring 'work' home in the past. This was not necessarily true for all the women in my study. Some women, such as Cleo (retail trade) and Geraldine (hairdressing), mentioned the difficulty of being a working mother in the past, but many had been in jobs where they had been expected to stay late to finish things off, (5) or had been employed in jobs such as childminding or outworking for the clothing trade, where work had come into their homes. For some, this was still the case and they had the additional pressures and complexity of fitting together family, paid employment and study. Only one of the women was in a financial position to be able to have paid domestic help. However, she wanted to justify this to me by saying that she had very little social life and as she hated housework, this was her little indulgence. The women often revealed feelings of guilt connected with 'neglect' of their domestic roles (mentioned twenty eight times in ten interviews).

Edwards (1993) also describes how 'bringing work home' for her students meant not only books to read and essays to write, but also mental involvement; they described the way in which the subjects they were studying were constantly in their thoughts, as were their families when they were at university. Similarly, the women in my own study talked of juggling their commitments, thinking about children who had started at new schools or playgroups, worrying about the evening meal, while at college. The mothers of young children had particular concerns about getting back to the childminder if there was a transport problem, or if a client in hairdressing was taking longer than they had expected. The result was an additional mental load and on occasions, stress. Mature women students are faced with dilemmas and choices. Edwards suggests that their beliefs about what their priorities should be and how time should be allocated, related to not only the physical apportionment of time but also to mental time.

Priorities and 'quality standards' within a limited time frame

When the women had tried to add the demands of study onto their family commitments and found that organisation could only take them so far towards achieving their 'targets', they were faced with decisions about priorities. The time spent with children, especially related to their education, was seen as very important and therefore could not be reduced. When push came to shove, study time lost out. Morrison (1992) found that the outwardly passive thinking and reading times, were most easily eroded away by family demands. The areas where mature women students cut down tended to be social and recreational activities outside the home and domestic tasks, but as Edwards (1993) has commented, this was not unproblematic in terms of how the women felt about themselves.

Domestic tasks were usually the areas which were left undone when time was short,

'Your house falls apart around your ears. You know. You've got laundry that's been there for two weeks and you still haven't tackled it and that used to get on my nerves because in the morning I'd have no clothes because they'd be in the washing basket' (Michelle, interview)

In industry, if a quality standard can not be economically maintained, the standard is lowered. Hochschild ((1975) has suggested that working mothers similarly redefine their standards and roles to help them cope with changed circumstances. Edwards (1993) suggests that the situation is in fact more complex. She identified that although the standard the women in her study, came to achieve and accept at a surface level, was lower than before they became students, this did not necessarily alter the way they felt about what their real domestic standard, and achievement against it, should be. She concludes that:

'[...] the women were often still working with the actual or presumed acceptable standards of others, be they those of partners, relatives, visiting researchers or society in general. Even in private they were under the sanction of the public scrutiny they carried in their minds. They attempted to redefine their standards on one level but were unable to do so on another' (Edwards, 1995:78)

I interviewed students in the college, rather than in their own homes, so they did not have to accommodate my attitude to their standards, however several of them mentioned the standards of others in relation to the domestic chores. As previously quoted, Petra told me that she polishes every day because her husband 'likes the house spotless'.

Edwards (1993) has described the way some of the women students in her study sometimes felt that the pressures on their time were making them 'anti social'; and Brannen and Moss (1988) found in their research with working mothers, that reduced social activity often resulted with increased demands on their time. In my own study, women also discussed their reduced social life with varying emotions. For the lone mothers, socialising was an opportunity for adult conversation and relaxation; maintaining friendships was also important because it was often part of the support system which allowed them to be students as well, with friends and neighbours available to help out with childcare at short notice and without financial cost.

'The past two weeks my daughter's started school and I take her to nursery school near my home and I have to travel then across London to get here and that's a fear for me, but I have a neighbour who has said she could go and pick my daughter up if anything happened' (Trish, interview)

For all the women, social contact with old friends and the development of relationships with other students, was part of their emotional support system. Although the women students recognised the importance of friendships, especially when they had little or no support at home, they sometimes found it difficult to justify. Cleo told me:

'I might spend the time, and feel really guilty about it, just chatting in the college with the other students' (Cleo, interview)

Yet she described 'paying the bills or doing a bit of shopping' as 'normal', in other words, perfectly acceptable ways of spending her time.

Using time well in college

The women were clearly aware of the standards of behaviour and academic achievement levels expected of them by the college. For the most part, these coincided with their own standards:- punctuality and regular attendance; timely completion of assignments; reading, and course related activities outside the college such as gallery or theatre visits, undertaken regularly. However, they gave numerous examples of instances when they, and other students had not been able to meet these standards. Floella told me about an instance when the Sociology lecturer said that he did not believe any of the students had done the required reading.

'Oh yes, he was right, no problem about that, we've done our reading and our notes because it's disrespectful' (Floella, interview)

Although the standards can be articulated as institutional rules, the students tended to interpret them on a personal level, thus not doing homework was 'disrespectful'. This personal involvement was often encouraged by the behaviour of lecturers, especially the 'key tutors' described in chapter 6. I was often left with the impression that although students appreciated being treated as adults and autonomous learners, they also quite liked lecturers 'getting tough' about deadlines. It gave them 'permission' to work at home, they were doing it for 'Sandra' rather than for themselves. The attention that staff gave students was often received as personal, rather than professional, or bureaucratic. For example, students were impressed that their tutors cared enough about them to check up why they had been absent.

'I must admit that if people have time off, they're written to regularly. You wouldn't expect that for adults so much, that anyone would care' (Cleo, interview).

However, when funding by the FEFC is dependent on student retention, as I shall detail in chapter 6, a letter or telephone call may not always be an indicator of care for the individual's well being so much as an institutional response to the pressures of the education market.

Some women who had underachieved at school and were determined to succeed now, still felt some embarrassment at being seen to buy into the normative educational paradigm. Morag contrasts her behaviour at school with her behaviour at college,

'I was the one that sat at the back and had a lark and a joke' (Morag, interview)

'I'm your ideal swotty student because I'm in on time and I work, and I think everyone else should feel the same' (Morag, interview)

'I'm trying to have the same attitude I had when I was working - get up at 9.00, be there on time and don't go out in the evening as it affects the quality of your work, It sounds very snotty' (Nicola, interview)

Men and time

Partners and boyfriends were often described by women as the greatest time consumers and the least controllable, as is supported by other research including Hartmann (1981) and Thorogood (1987). As Edwards (1993) reports, and for the women in my study, it was the attention that men demanded, rather than any increase in domestic work that they caused, which women found to be most constraining of their time. It was also an area which caused conflict. Michelle told me how she tried to organise her time to study at home,

- Amanda Were you able to work when your husband was around?
- Michelle I just used to ignore him. That's what he didn't like. He, you know, everything was being neglected because I was trying to get into a routine.
- Amanda You mean it (housework) was being neglected or he said he was?
- Michelle He said he was being neglected
- Amanda Oh he
- Michelle and the housework. It was because he wasn't being pampered, that's what it was. He'd say 'get up and make me a cup of tea' and I'd say 'no I'm doing something'. Before I'd get up and make the tea' but now I'm finding it a lot harder with the Access course, to fit it in.

Four of the fourteen women had male partners living with them. Only two of these women had male partners who shared some domestic responsibility, or created more 'time' for them. In general, their expectations of the women were the same as before they started their courses, although they might 'help-out' with a school journey, or turn a blind eye to dishes from the evening meal not washed up until the next morning.

Competing demands on time and feelings of guilt

The external expectations on the women and their learnt responses, worked together to produce feelings of guilt, which in turn limited their achievements - sometimes in actuality and sometimes within their own perceptions.

Edwards (1993) states that the women in her study felt that family and studies had a legitimate call on their time because they had chosen freely to have both in their lives. They rarely felt that they were performing adequately in either sphere because of the competing demands. The women in my study were studying part-time in FE rather than full-time in HE, yet feelings of guilt and inadequacy and sometimes anger at their families, could be detected. However, women are often reluctant to talk about families in a negative way. This is partly because they feel responsible for the conduct of their families and partly because of the cultural pressure of the privacy of the home and expectation of loyalty towards male partners, (Pahl, 1985).

Some of the women also felt guilty at being angry and once again blamed themselves for their inability to be simultaneously, the perfect mother and grade A student. Often, as discussed in

chapter 4 of this study, memories of past educational failure flooded back as proof, as it were, that they were lacking. However, these women should not be seen as victims, or even survivors. Some of them were able to stand back from the external pressures and re-define timescales to suit their personal circumstances better. Although Cleo constantly talked to me about needing to get on with gaining a qualification because of what she saw as her 'advanced age' (31 years), she decided to extend her Access course over two years:

'Even though when everyone got their offers (of university places) I felt a bit oh (whimpering) and felt I'm not getting anywhere. I thought, no I'm going to do it gradually and it doesn't matter if someone else has a child and is in the same situation as me. It's different for me. If they're in a rush then that's their business. Even if it seems a waste of a year to some people, I'm prepared to take my time and enjoy it more' (Cleo, interview)

From the institutional view this is a real problem both financially and in terms of performance targets, with a fixed amount of money allocated by the FEFC for the qualification, irrespective of how long it takes the student to achieve it. The question as to how patient colleges can be, is one to which I will return later.

As already described, many of the women found it difficult to make time for their own interests.

'Taking time for study was, in the main, viewed as taking time for themselves and therefore as taking it away from others'. (Edwards, 1993:66)

Edwards (1993) suggests that time for themselves was problematic: many of the women in her study found it difficult to see themselves as people in their own right, not just somebody's daughter, mother or partner. These women did not have a sense of 'self' which separated their own needs, including their education, from their family life and relationships.

In my own study many of the women described feeling torn between two sets of responsibilities and two sets of people who had expectations of them. Phrases like 'letting them down' were used both in terms of family and lecturers, the relationship with both often being 'personal', indicative of feelings of commitment and responsibility in both spheres. I suggest this indicates a rejection of the externally driven movement towards commodification of education, with learning agreements and student entitlement. The students' wishes are for an emotional rather than contractual relationship with their lecturers. This is a key issue for colleges which is developed in chapter 6 of this study.

Although the students may have been mainly occupied at a particular moment of time in one sphere or the other, a consciousness remained that something was being neglected which often resulted in feelings of stress and guilt and arguably in distraction from, and under achievement in, the task in hand, producing further stress and guilt.

As discussed in chapter 4, the mothers in my research often felt guilty if they studied when their children wanted them to play with them.

‘My children come out with comments such as “Mummy has been working for ages on her essay” and I do feel that sometimes they have had to take second place, which of course fills me with enormous guilt’ (Emma, essay)

Edwards (1993) similarly notes that home study, even when it was to improve the families’ standard of living and prospects, was often difficult for the women to reconcile with feelings of guilt about ‘depriving’ children of time and attention in the present. ‘Selfish’ was a word often used by the women I interviewed, in relation to their feelings about asserting their need to study at home (eleven times in five interviews). An extract from my interview with Trish articulates the complex feelings many women have about how to do the best for their children in the short and long term and also achieve a separate sense of their own identities.

‘I want my daughter to be proud of me, but it’s (her course) purely for me, it’s purely selfish as well. Purely selfish. With my daughter I find it easy to pass her on, in a way, if I get the opportunity. At the moment she’s started nursery school from nine until three and because I live in (inner city borough), I’d have to leave here at 2.00 to pick her up at 3.00, and I managed to find her a place in an after school play-school until 5.00 which is fantastic for me and I felt very guilty, because as soon as she started nursery school, in a way I felt as if I’d pushed her away again, because I didn’t want to pick her up ‘til 5.00, but I needed that extra hour here for me’ (Trish, interview)

The majority of mothers from across the range of cultures represented in my study, relied heavily on state and college childcare and the support of friends or family. The ‘payment’ for this could often be costly in ways other than financial. Time gained at one point may have to be reciprocated at another, criticism and emotional pressure may have to be borne in order for the arrangement to continue. Helping out did not necessarily imply shared values or priorities. It can be argued that guilt has a useful function; it prompted the women to attend college, finish their essays on time, maintain friendships and feed and clothe their children. Sadly, the stress and guilt felt by some mature women returners to education, has been enough to make them abandon their studies. Many of the women I spoke with had considered dropping out of their present courses, even though this might have been only once, in a low moment. Similar

responses have been reported by McGivney (1996) in her research into the reasons for adult students leaving courses early. Several of the women in my study, including Zandra, Lizzie and Morag, had dropped out of previous courses. They had however returned to college, but not necessarily to the same course.

Time is finite and is a key issue in understanding the pressures on women students. My research demonstrates how many women's lives are divided into 'time zones' by physiological factors concerning fertility and childrearing and that this often affects the timing of their decision to pursue their own learning agendas. Having made the decision to return to education, the time they feel able to devote to developing themselves is further circumscribed by discourses concerning women's role within the family. They are judged and judge themselves at home, work and college on their ability to manage their time. 'Coping' is as much about dealing with feelings about how time is used, as with its physical apportionment.

LIFE-CHANGE

What women want from education

What do mature women students want from education? Mallia (1997) found that although the women in her research said that the main reason for returning to college was to get a job at the end of the course, they clearly expected a more fulfilling experience than simply a vocational education. Similarly, the women in my study wanted to gain a skill such as hairdressing; to have qualifications which would lead to a career rather than the low paid jobs most of them had had in the past. The working-class women wanted an improved standard of living for themselves and if they had them, for their children. They wanted independence - they did not want to live on State Benefits. Beyond the practical changes, all the women irrespective of class or 'race' wanted their involvement in education to result in a life change which would transform the way they felt about themselves and the way they were perceived by others. They wanted to feel fulfilled, to make a contribution to society and to be respected for their achievements. They wanted to feel confident and in control of their lives.

'Fashion is something that I do for me and is something that I'm doing to make me happy'
(Zandra, black middle-class, interview)

'I was stuck in a certain wage bracket. I just couldn't seem to get past it [...] I just wanted to get a better job. (Marilyn, black working-class, interview)

'I think a lot of it is to do with bettering yourself, because I think so much of the time, like women are put down so much, it's to better their career prospects a lot of the time' (Michelle, white, working-class, interview)

Michelle's attitude is influenced by her own experiences of having her abilities and efforts belittled by her partner and father, but her comments recognise the wider oppression of women. Nicola, and Cleo were examples of women who saw qualifications as the route to a better career,

'It wasn't just for the degree. It was hopefully to gain a career' (Cleo, mixed race working-class, interview)

'[...] a degree and I want to get a better job at the end of it' (Nicola, white middle-class, interview)

However, Nicola a white middle-class woman, knew that many of her friends were unemployed even though they had degrees. Petra, a white working-class woman, felt that she had been deprived of an education because of poverty. She wanted to claim the place in university, she had formerly been denied.

'It's the whole prestige of going to university and getting that degree' (Petra, interview)

Many of the women also recognised that what they wanted from education changed over time,

'I think that even if you're not sure what you're going back for, you know, you think that you want to go back for this, then once you've gone back, after three months you say, 'oh why am I doing this? I'd rather be doing that' and I've seen that happening, then you should change and get on and do it' (Lizzie, interview)

Lizzie understood that involvement in the learning process brings about change and new aspirations and opportunities. Her recommendation was that others should return to college even if they did not know specifically what they wanted at the beginning. This was echoed by many of the women. Nicola had a goal for the future which motivated her, but she also told me 'I know I'm going to change in the next four or five years' (Nicola, interview). This is something that adult educators understand, (McGivney, 1990,1993; Coats 1996). It is not something that is easily accommodated by the FEFC model - students should receive pre-course advice and guidance which will identify their 'primary learning goals', the number of guided learning hours have to be negotiated and committed to a written learning agreement at

the beginning of the course, although this may be modified after time. This model of how education 'should be' does not as I have described, fit with how adults lives are lived.

Michelle identified a difference between those people who came to college for instrumental reasons and those who came for intrinsic reasons, a love of learning for its own sake,

'A lot of people come because they feel they've got to improve themselves and are just doing it to gain a qualification for a certain thing, but I really like it (pause). It's become obsessive, not that I need it like cigarettes' (Michelle, interview)

She recognised a change that had taken place within herself and although the award of a certificate was important to her as a symbol of achievement and the passport to further study, she had also discovered the enjoyment of learning and being within a learning community.

Women's sense of themselves as learners

As I have already described in chapter 4, the initial motivation to return to education for several of the women had been to find stimulation and companionship, rather than to gain skills and qualifications for employment. Their experiences at college had increased their confidence in their abilities to learn and informed them of the wider educational opportunities available to them. Although the women were looking to change aspects of their lives, the initial choices they made about courses and future careers were often still based on traditional women's skills and could be seen as extensions of their caring roles within the family. 'Choices' were also made according to cultural dispositions and familial' habituses' (Bourdieu, 1985, 1990; Reay, 1998a). Mallia (1997) similarly states that although the women in her study wanted a life change, they often selected courses which would give them a qualification in something they felt they had an affinity for, which reflected their life experiences. She comments,

'[...] this is not a denigration of their decision, for events in their lives seem to give meaning to the subjects they chose to study' (Mallia, 1997:1)

Thus decisions to become a counsellor or social worker may be based on previous involvements with those professions. For example, although Morag had described childminding as 'the most unstimulating job on earth' she had invested a huge amount of time and effort in her own child and was 'thrilled at his achievement'; she also opted to study for a qualification in childcare. However, she was building on skills she felt confident about and was

looking for a way to improve her own life and that of others. The status the qualification would give her, and a career pathway were also important to her.

'I could go on and do a degree as well. It doesn't end there (with the BTEC certificate) I did have a place on the NNEB which I accepted but then I reconsidered because I thought, I'll be stuck [...] this is a good grounding for anything medical - in the caring professions, training for social work even.' (Morag, interview)

Yet wanting to achieve educational success and owning their skills and achievements, was sometimes problematic and could lead to some women setting themselves targets below their abilities, or limiting them within traditional areas of female study. For the working-class women who came from families and communities where few people had gained qualifications, there were sometimes tensions between their personal aspirations and self belief and the perception that education was part of the culture pattern of higher socio-economic groups and therefore for 'others'. Thus, the women displayed a disposition to behave according to their social 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1985, 1990). Successive research (NIAE, 1970; ACACE, 1982; McGivney, 1990; Uden, 1996; Kennedy, 1997) into participation in post compulsory education, has revealed the low participation rate of people from lower socio-economic groups. As discussed in chapter 4, individuals carry powerful feelings into adulthood about their abilities to learn and their entitlement to education. Even those who control their 'threshold fear' enough to enrol may have feelings of being an imposter which remain (McIntosh, 1985).

Although Zandra was the only woman in the study to have achieved academic success in the past, and most of the women talked about their lack of confidence, what comes across in talking to many of them is a deep sense of their own abilities and worth, which they are desperate to develop both in terms of their own self esteem and to gain public recognition of their skills. Qualifications, and particularly a higher education degree, were seen as outward symbols of their achievement. For researchers with numerous qualifications, the emotional significance of gaining, as an adult, your first certificate may be difficult to imagine.

'Passing my GCSE maths and English, that is the thing I hoped to achieve. I was so nervous and I did struggle last year. I was so impatient to await the results that I 'phoned (the examinations officer). I was jumping for joy. I ended up crying [...] he told me the results and I was screaming. I put the 'phone down and I was jumping for joy and then I went to a party at the weekend, after I found out, and celebrated and rang up everybody and told them. [...] when you get certificates to prove that you can actually do it, it makes you feel good' (Michelle, interview).

'It's hard work and that's why you get a kick out of it, because you can see that you are achieving' (Marilyn, interview)

Academic success was not a replacement for achievement in other parts of their lives. The women mostly derived great satisfaction from being a good mother and competent housewife, evidenced by Petra's comments about her domestic organisation and Morag's delight at her son's scholarship. Yet these are skills which are not afforded high status by society. They wanted to escape the stereotype that their position as housewife, mother, or lone parent ascribes them.

Achieving financial independence, qualifications, a good job, were often described not only in terms of their personal aspirations, but in terms of proving other people wrong about their abilities either at a personal level,

'My ex-partner used to say that I didn't know anything and stuff like that, so it was the thing to prove him wrong' (Michelle, interview)

or at a wider social level as I shall presently describe.

The changes women experienced through their new involvement with education stirred up complex feelings about conflicting roles, priorities, who they felt they were, who they wanted to be and could produce deep emotions,

'We had to keep journal and when (at the end of the course) I read through from beginning to end, it brought tears to my eyes' (Morag, interview)

The women's ability to cope with the practical and emotional aspects of returning to education and manage a home was continuously challenged. The fear of failure often remained with them throughout the course.

'I had to learn self-discipline, which was something that I hadn't been used to for five years, but I found that after a couple of weeks it wasn't as hard as I thought [...] at home you really need a hell of a lot of motivation to sit down and do these essays [...] I worry that I'm going to fail. I feel sick when I think of the exams coming up and the things that I've got to do that I haven't done. I do feel pressure' (Nicola, interview)

Yet the positive feelings were usually enough to outweigh concerns,

'I haven't felt so happy in ages. I'm finally doing what I really want to be doing. A tremendous weight has sort of come off my shoulders' (Nicola, interview)

Many of the women from across the cultural range of the sample, said that returning to education had enabled them to gain something that had been missing in their lives, often for many years.

‘I’m much more positive. I use to get quite depressed beforehand and I used to indulge in ‘what have I done with my life? where am I going? and now I have a sense of purpose and achievement as well’ (Nicola, white middle-class, interview)

‘I knew that little space was empty, as well, since I was sixteen or seventeen, but I wasn’t in a position to do anything about it until now - it’s come together, thirteen years later - I was lacking all those years’ (Trish, white working-class, interview)

They now had a focus, a sense of achievement outside their families and a growing confidence. For example, several times Zandra emphasised the personal change that had been effected through her participation in a women’s assertiveness course. It had helped her to regain her self confidence and feel that she could have a career again. It gave her more personal rights within the home - not just an existence which was relative to others.

‘I tended to feel useless, that at times I was a doormat, that everyone at home would take things from me and I’d never get anything back in return and I think that coming here has helped to make the children more aware of me and that I have college work to do’ (Zandra, black middle-class, interview)

Lizzie similarly talked about education giving her new skills and qualifications, but most importantly, it had played a part in helping her to rebuild her life and regain her confidence after a difficult marriage.

‘I’ve found that I’ve got my confidence back again, at last. The last couple of years I’ve felt a much stronger person. I think that college has done that for me’ (Lizzie, white middle-class, interview)

Michelle believed that returning to college has made her more confident and raised her status and value to society,

‘I feel I can hold a conversation, an intellectual conversation, not brilliantly because a lot of things I’ve only touched, but I feel that I can help someone else, especially when they say they’re doing GCSE Maths now. I say ‘Oh well, I know this, I can help you’. It makes you feel good that I can help someone else and that you can hold a conversation about a certain topic and you know what you’re speaking about, as before I had no qualifications and so I felt I wasn’t worth anything. I’d only ever done catering. If you asked me how to make a sandwich I could show you, but other than that I had nothing to offer’ (Michelle, white working-class, interview)

What is evident in her statement, is her recognition of the status of skills and the importance that our society places in academic qualifications - that her opinion did not count before she had them. Yet she is still trapped within the historic discourses of caring for others and feminine self-effacement. Nicola also feels more able to hold an opinion and express her thoughts in public,

‘The knowledge you’ve picked up in class you’re reflecting socially - I feel I can contribute more to discussions’ (Nicola, white middle-class interview)

For some of the women, like Trish who was studying art and design, return to college allowed deep feelings to be expressed and ideas articulated, which had hitherto been locked away:

‘It’s part of my personality [...] it’s how I express myself, 99% of my existence is how I express myself through painting [...] I’m only discovering now how deep and how integral to my being it is, because it’s a total expression. It’s how I see myself as a person’ (Trish, white working-class, interview)

The exploration of these feelings and ideas could be exciting, it could also be dangerous and frightening.

Personal change: a challenge to culture, friendships and self confidence

Although they were now living in a multi-cultural inner city environment, a number of the women had been brought up in smaller, less diverse communities. For example, Petra had spent her youth in a Yorkshire mining village, Lizzie in a vicarage in the Channel Islands, Zandra on a small Caribbean Island. Their return to education had brought them into contact with a variety of new people, many of whom came from very different cultural backgrounds. They had been required to challenge their assumptions about the world and themselves,

‘I am far more aware of stereotypical images being portrayed in the media and thus I am developing a critical approach to learning. I have also challenged my own Western perspectives’ (Lorna, essay)

This was as true for the students studying hairdressing and catering, as it was for those on Access to Humanities courses. However, it was not only their own attitudes that were challenged; gaining new insights, becoming more critical and developing self confidence could also affect their relationships with friends and family,

'History has given me an added awareness to the problems of the 20th Century, it has pushed me into further reading and a better grasp of problems such as the Middle East, apartheid of World War 1 and has certainly led to heated debate at home' (Emma, essay)

In chapter 4, I have discussed the effect of study on the women's relationships with their families. The possibility of altered relationships with friends was also an issue for many of the women in relation to their personal identities. These women were faced by a dilemma, they wanted education to be a catalyst for change in their lives and yet they were concerned that personal change might adversely affect friendships. Allan (1989) has discussed the way in which notions of equality shape relationships with friends. He has suggested that the altering of one person's status in relation to another, may create a tension as issues of hierarchy and authority are introduced into a relationship which has grown out of similarity rather than difference.

Edwards (1993) suggests that the mature women students in her study had different perceptions about the effect of HE on friendships, according to race and culture. Where friends had studied in higher or further education, the women were able to share their experiences; where they had not, they were more likely to hide their academic knowledge from friends in an effort to protect their friendship. Edwards indicates that social mobility was a particular concern for black and working class students, some of whom were worried that friends might think that they had become 'better' because of their qualifications and increased capacity to deal with officialdom and 'the system'. Perhaps there were also concerns that by changing their status, the university women might in some ways contribute to the oppression of other black or working class people.

The situation some of the women in my research found themselves in is well illustrated by my conversation with Michelle (white, working-class). Her return to education had been motivated by a wish for her life to be different. She believed that she had changed as a result of education and that the change had been a positive change for her. However, in her wish to distance herself from her own former life, she supported the stereotype of how mothers spend their time.

'Washing and ironing. that's not the life for me. I do my bit but I'm not very domesticated. I'm not maternal in the way that I could sit at home all day watching soaps and looking after the baby' (Michelle, interview)

Although aspiring to be better educated, more skilled and confident with a better standard of living, the women were also proud of their roots and history. Petra had worked for fourteen years to gain her place in university, a place she felt had been denied her because of her

family's working class background. She desperately wanted the status of a degree she also wished to retain her working class identity.

- Petra I grew up in a mining village and people didn't go to university, I mean the only people who went to university were people who could afford it [...] there was that whole aura, university was for others, it wasn't for you.
- Amanda Do you look on yourself as being middle class, working class?
- Petra 'I'm working class. I'm from a mining village, definitely, I'm definitely working class and my husband is a chauffeur and I'm just a housewife'

Perhaps in an attempt to assure herself that relationships she cared about were not threatened, Petra defined any change that she might have undergone as 'internal'. She separated out the way she had come to see herself, from the way that she was seen by others and the way in which she interacted with others.

'I don't think I've changed at all, it just made me realise that I'm things that I didn't think I was, so it's opened up my eyes to myself and it hasn't changed me' (Petra, interview)

Marilyn (black, working-class) does not think that education will change her and distance her from her friends, although some of her friends do tease her about 'using long words' and going off with her 'college friends'. Since returning to college she has discovered that there are many other people she knows who are also on courses,

'Since I've started doing this, they've all come out of the woodwork and said, "Oh yes, I'm at college"' (Marilyn, interview).

She is motivated in low moments by the achievements of other black women she knows who have returned to education, struggled with families, studies and work and succeeded in attaining their qualifications.

Many of the women from across the breadth of the sample gave examples of positive responses from friends. Where family or friends had been negative, or indifferent to the changes they perceived, there was obvious sadness. Cleo told me,

'There's one particular friend who was really close and she was really strange, you know. She said 'you've really changed' sort of thing, she said 'you're tired but your eyes are alright, you're really alive, you know, and I think that she felt a bit threatened by the change' (Cleo, interview).

Cleo recognised the challenge her education was presenting her friend. This friend who had been 'like a sister', now showed no interest in Cleo's course and although they still saw each other, she felt that they had less in common. As with some of the women in Edward's (1993) study, Cleo now restricted her conversations with this friend to 'everyday chit-chat'. However, few of the women in my own study talked about the need to be careful about the language they used, or to hide their new knowledge. I suggest that there may be several reasons for this: FE does not have the same status as University and therefore did not pose such a threat to individuals; in some cases the new skills such as hairdressing, catering or childcare were of practical help to the friends and family and added to the 'value' of their friendship; also the mobility of many of the women within the inner city meant that friendships were constantly changing in relation to where they lived and worked and who they met in connection with their children and in other daily interactions. There were some women like Floella (black, working-class), Trish (white, working-class) and Nicola (white, middle-class), whose social circle was made up of people who already had qualifications and for them, college was 'catching up' rather than moving into a 'superior' position.

Where the women identified that old friends were uneasy with their altered persona, they were usually generous. For example, Cleo identified that her friend had similar academic ability to herself, but suggested that she had not yet reached the right stage in her life to develop herself. They appeared to identify their former selves within their friends. I suggest that the women's behaviour indicated a solidarity which linked their identity with others in terms of race, class and above all gender - they were seldom as generous towards the more destructive attitudes of male friends or members of their families.

For all the sad stories, there were many more concerning friends who had been very positive and supportive about the increased confidence and skills that the women had clearly developed. In addition, college had opened up the possibilities of new friendships, often from a wider social group than before.

Making a contribution to society and challenging the status quo

As the women began to enjoy education and to see themselves as successful learners (as fragile as that part of their self image might be at some times), many of them also saw the potential

that education had to transform the lives of others in their families and the wider community. (This arose twenty four times within nine interviews). What often emerged in my conversations with the women, was the wish to be agents of social change, although this was seldom articulated as such. Yet the careers they chose were often within the historic 'caring' discourse: Abimbola had started teaching, Petra planned to become a primary teacher and Morag a teacher of children with special educational needs. Floella was involved in voluntary work and was considering becoming a social worker and Cleo planned to become a counsellor. While trapped in a discourse which associated their role as women, with the physical, emotional and moral welfare of others, they were also part of a feminist discourse of empowerment and change. Their new qualifications would mean that instead of being confined within the home, they would be 'professionals', women with a degree of independence and status. They would be role models for their children and for others. It was important to many of the women, that they might be able to make a difference to the lives of other people by drawing on their own, often painful, life experience and knowledge. It is perhaps not a co-incidence that many of the college staff who emerged as 'key tutors' (6) had also been adult learners themselves.

For example, Abimbola was clear that part of her motivation to return to education as a mature student was to challenge the social structures which limit the achievement of black women. It was important to her to demonstrate that she could achieve and help others to achieve.

'For me education is about transforming and challenging the status quo[....] challenging the common-sense assumptions that people make about other people, other groups [...] I know for me it matters very much as a woman, as a student, as a teacher' (Abimbola, interview)

Abimbola's view about the importance of increasing the proportion of black women lecturers, was supported by comments from other black women. Cleo valued the fact that for some subjects she had a black tutor whom she described as 'a good role model - clever'. The majority of black women I spoke with noticed the lack of black lecturers but saw their own involvement in education as a way to change this (Bird, 1996). Floella told me that she tried to support other black students to see how they could use education to 'make a difference':

'There's one girl, she's intermittent in her attendance and she's not very clear about the role that this course should be playing in her life. She can see racism in everything, and maybe she can. Why not be pragmatic. If you have to learn something learn it and then go on to make a difference. I think she's not clear about the function this course should have in her life and there's a mistake in allowing things to overshadow' (Floella, interview)

Abimbola recognised that for some students on some courses, the lack of respect for black experience and culture was an issue - an issue that could be turned back on the student,

‘When you start saying these things, if you say it to a tutor or someone who could actually do something about it, they do not believe you, they do not believe you. At the worst extent it’s “you’ve got something psychologically wrong with you, why should you think this? (laughing) you’ve got no cause” ’ (Abimbola, interview).

She believed that while some of the students on higher level courses were able to articulate their real concerns, there are many other students on basic level courses who believed that it was not the curriculum or the way that it was delivered that was at fault, but themselves. She believed that some students had left courses because they had become disillusioned with the education process.

Abimbola worked as a secretary. She returned to education as a mature student to learn crafts when her children were young. She is progressing through further and higher education and teaching part-time. Whilst she has seen many changes in the education system, she is depressed by the lack of change in people’s attitudes towards black women. Returning to the college as an educated woman and qualified teacher, some students and staff still assume that she works in the crèche or canteen.

Conclusion

Returning to education was part of a re-assessment by the women of their achievements and potential; becoming a student provided opportunities but also challenges. The timing of their return and the time available for study, was gendered. At the same time as wanting to make a life-change and assert their own individual needs, the women were caught up within historic discourses (discussed in chapter 1), which place women responsible for the physical and emotional care of the family (Purvis, 1991). Their ability to cope with becoming a student, relied on their ability to manage feelings of entitlement, guilt and selfishness, as much as on their organisational skills.

The women were making ‘choices’ about their education within the context of the FE educational and employment markets, where particular class and racial forms of cultural capital are valued above others. They were aware that acquisition of cultural and economic

capital had consequences for them. They desired personal change in terms of increased confidence, self esteem and status, whilst also wishing for continuity in their relationships with family and friends - although it should be recognised that these were dynamic rather than static relationships. Many of the women faced a dilemma, the changes they sought might also bring about changes in themselves that they did not want and which they might not be able to control. The moral and practical support of others was of great importance in helping the women to effect a life-change which challenged many of the existing structures in their lives. Thus, gender, 'race' and class dynamics interacted in a complex way, according to the different personal histories of the women and affected their interpretation of their worlds.

In what follows I shall consider the extent to which colleges recognise the pressures on mature women students and are able to provide appropriate courses and support structures, within the policy framework and funding provided by government.

NOTES

1. 'Life-changers' and 'specific focusers' were early codes emerging from interviews. 'Life-changers' were typically people who were dissatisfied with their lives and were looking to education as a means of changing their status and their feelings about themselves. 'Specific focusers' selected courses to enable them to meet a short term goal e.g. word-processing, language skills - sometimes they became 'life-changers' as a result of engagement in the learning process.
2. A conversation with Jim Soulsby, 'Older and Bolder' researcher for NIACE, confirmed a lack of data on older women in FE. A sharp decline in participation by women over 50 was apparent in the statistics he had obtained. Some professions have declared age limits for training (for nursing it is 46 years). Conversation, 16th January, 1998.
3. The accreditation of prior experience and learning (APEL) has been advanced as a way of recognising the skills women develop outside formal education, yet the cost to colleges of supporting students through the preparation of evidence has meant that it is still under developed.
4. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are structured to allow students to gain qualifications in units over an extended period of time, although in reality, where these are gained as part of a college course rather than in the workplace, there is often less flexibility.
5. The recent lack of employment opportunities and pressure on businesses has resulted in increased demands on employees including working longer hours and Sundays which has left women workers with families, difficult choices.
6. 'Key Tutors' were members of staff, usually but not always lecturers, who provided students with holistic support to enable them to manage personal change. This was an important early code and linked with investigations I was carrying out into student retention. Veronica McGivney similarly reports on the importance of 'significant others' in the other research projects which contributed to her book *Staying or Leaving the Course* (1996).

CHAPTER 6

ISSUES FOR COLLEGES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR STUDENTS

In this chapter I shall return to the themes identified in the first section of this study and consider the way in which government education policy is being interpreted through practice at sector level and how this affects opportunities for women returners. In the first part I shall discuss the current issues facing colleges, as managers seek to interpret policy and deliver services at local level within the quasi market framework. In the next three parts I shall discuss in detail the problems faced by managers in relation to key performance indicators, the 'new three Rs' - recruitment, retention and results, selected by the FEFC to measure the effectiveness of colleges. I shall draw on my empirical research to demonstrate the lack of fit between the educational offer and student need and identify the contradictions inherent in policy and the dilemmas faced by managers and staff.

POLICY AND PRACTICE - THE EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGES

Education policy is interpreted through practice,

'educationalists are adept at finding 'spaces' to work in. They eye each centralising government initiative at first with horror, fury and awe After a time, the awe lessens; denunciation diminishes from an angry shouting to an occasional murmur. There begins a period of calculation. How can this juggernaut, which obviously is not going to go away, be worked with' (Jones, 1989:84)

Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) have argued in relation to the 1988 Education Act, that policy documents are not closed. They argue that:

'Texts carry with them both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces. The reality of policy in practice depends upon the compromises and accommodations to these in particular settings' (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992:15)

College managers and staff have been working in a climate of continuous change and through their practice, have been attempting to interpret, accommodate and sometimes subvert aspects of government policy according to their own beliefs, values and educational philosophies.

Every institution has its own history, internal relationships and values and is working within a local and highly specific, market context which is affected by location, socio-economic factors, employment, demography and competition from other providers of education and training for people over sixteen (Bagley, Woods and Glatter, 1994). However, as I described in chapter 2, beyond this all colleges are subjected to the wider effects of the market structure. They are disciplined through the funding arrangements, especially those provided by government via the FEFC; published student performance information in terms of open enrolment, retention and qualifications; 'bench-marking' through growth and efficiency targets; (1) public and customer opinion; (2) and published inspection reports. Throughout the sector the issues and concerns are the same, how to attract and retain an increasing number of students and improve service standards and student achievement,(3) with a steadily reducing budget, in a social and economic context which makes it increasingly difficult for potential students, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, to take up and successfully complete the educational and training opportunities available to them (4).

As the first cycle of FEFC inspections came towards completion, the report for the Council's Quality Assessment Committee (FEFC, 1997c) showed that not all colleges had been able to demonstrate a 'high quality of service' and some were facing financial disaster (5). In the summer of 1996, the TES and THES reported that according to the latest figures from the FEFC, nearly 300 of the 450 colleges in the sector were believed to have financial deficits, 50 more than in the previous year. The estimated sum owed by the sector was £83 million. The sudden ending in 1997 of the Demand Led Element (DLE) funding, which rewarded those colleges who achieved beyond their target units, created even greater pressure on institutions, many of whom sold assets or reduced the number of staff they employed in order to remain solvent (6).

Somehow the vision of an independent college managing its own budget and able to respond quickly and imaginatively to meet local educational and training needs, has become in reality a desperate struggle for survival in the face of underfunding, increasing requirements for performance information and competition from other providers including school sixth forms, other colleges, private trainers and higher education. The search for 'new money' from sources such as European funding, Business Partnerships and sponsorship, for 'new students' including business clients, and overseas students, (7) and the search for 'new curriculum delivery' such as self-access workshops with technician rather than lecturer support, or fast track approaches

which allow the full funding unit value to be claimed with minimal teaching time, have consumed much senior management time and energy (Tysome, 1997). All this has emphasised the fact that managing an educational establishment in the 1990s is very different from managing education (Russell-Walling, 1996; Midgley, 1996).

Working with the FEFC funding methodology - the carrot and stick

Further Education is big business, with a government allocation of £3.15 billion funds in 1996/97 (8). Moneys are allocated to colleges, and other FE providers, by the regional FEFCs, according to a funding methodology (9) based on performance, but also related to history - an institution's level of funding at incorporation. Each college is allocated a specific value for the base units they can claim, this is their 'average level of funding' (ALF) (10). Colleges are able to claim units for each student, based on their programme of study for each 'tri-annual' period that they are in college. The computerised Individualised Student Record (ISR) report is used by the FEFC to apportion funding and these statistics are published. For a student eligible for remission according to set criteria, colleges are able to claim units for pre-entry advice and guidance, on course units weighted according to the set formula, achievement units for successful completion of the 'primary learning goal' and perhaps units for childcare and additional learning support (ALS). However the units provided for childcare and for ALS carry a restrictive bureaucracy with them and go very little way towards paying for these services. It is beyond the scope of this study to expand further on the extremely complex funding mechanism. This brief description merely outlines the way funds are allocated and highlights the way in which colleges are left to find resources for disadvantaged students (11).

During the first few years after incorporation, colleges were encouraged to expand to earn additional units of funding, although this also meant increased 'efficiency' as growth funding was only a proportion of the additional costs of enrolling more students (McGivney, 1996). The problem for colleges has been that the growth units do not cover the actual costs of increasing the number of students and taught hours. Whilst costs for colleges are rising in terms of staff pay awards and increased costs of supplies and services, they are having to find ways of delivering the curriculum more 'efficiently'. For some colleges increased efficiency has in reality meant reduced staffing and staff student contact hours (Page, 1996). It is no coincidence that the FEFC made a re-structuring fund available to colleges to subsidise staff

redundancy costs incurred before the end of April 1996. The scale of the situation is demonstrated by the suggestion that grants from the FEFC restructuring fund were claimed for 7,023 staff by March 1996 and were likely to be above 10,00 by the end of the period (Bell, 1996). The Report for the Quality Assessment Committee for 1995 - 96 states that efficiency gains approaching 20 per cent have been achieved as a result of reducing students' taught hours,

'from 30 hours or more each week a decade or so ago, a figure comparable with taught hours in many continental countries, most colleges now offer between 15 and 20 hours teaching to a full-time student.' (FEFC, 1997c:5).

For example, a 'successful' college which achieved a growth of 5% of units during 1996/97 would therefore still be facing an effective reduction in funding which for a college with a gross allocation of £9.25m. and an Average Level of Funding (ALF) of £18.50, could be in excess of £200,000 per annum (Macintyre Hudson Chartered Accountants, 1996). If this same college only achieved an average growth of 3%, the anticipated growth across the sector for 96/97, then the additional costs they might incur could be £434,000 compared with the extra income from the FEFC of £112,000. Colleges with a high (ALF) faced even greater costs and problems.

In spring 1997, amid accusations from the Government that the FEFC had failed to control franchising and the rising costs of growth in student numbers, colleges were put under additional pressure by government plans to end payment of the additional 'super' Demand Led Element (DLE) funding, part way through the academic year, after commitments had been made to students and staff had been contracted. Failure to meet the DLE funding in full, threatened an £84 million loss of expected funding to the sector and consequent widespread budget crises. In his letter to the FEFC chief Executive, The Association of Colleges Chief Executive, Roger Ward commented that:

'Tinkering with the variable rate within the framework already announced is likely to have effects which run completely counter to existing policies, as well as impacting on individual colleges in quite unpredictable ways' (FE Now, Feb. 1997:1)

The 'audit culture' and the search for greater 'efficiency'

In most colleges staff salaries are the largest element of cost and more than half of total expenditure. It is therefore not surprising that this is an area where the government has forced action and is an area where managers look for greater efficiency - more student contact, more flexible conditions of service for lecturers, a flatter management structure with less costly senior staff salaries, reductions in support staff costs in areas such as crèche, but increased numbers of low salaried non lecturing staff supporting learning.

In the years following incorporation, college managers have been required to negotiate new conditions of service with lecturing staff in an attempt to remove 'restrictive practices' and create more flexibility in the service. With the failure to reach a national agreement between the lecturers' union and the college employers, a patchy picture has developed not only across the sector but also in some instances within the same institution, with some lecturers on old conditions and some on new conditions of service. In the summer of 1996 Roger Ward, chief executive of the College's Employers' Forum (CEF) (1993 - 1997) told the TES (9.8.96 and 23.8.96) that following the outcome of an unfair dismissal case at Chippenham College (12) that the 20% of lecturers who had still not signed a CEF contract must face the possibility of instant dismissal. External pressures have caused considerable damage to relationships between lecturers and senior managers. As Coffield (1996) put it,

All is far from well in a system where a memorandum entitled 'Twenty ways to Harass your Staff', is circulated from the Employers' Forum to college principals with the aim of coercing lecturers into signing contracts which reduce their terms and conditions. (Coffield, 1996:6)

Management are under pressure to ensure that the staff hours available are optimally deployed. Not only is it important that established staff teach the maximum number of hours, but that sufficient students are enrolled on courses and successfully complete according to FEFC criteria. The teaching on many courses with prescribed hours and funding has been reduced to the minimum and wherever possible alternative and cheaper methods of staff/student contact introduced (13).

Whilst lecturers complain that they are required to teach larger size classes and for more hours, the FEFC inspectorate report on an average class size of only 11 students in the 22,000 classes observed (FEFC Chief Inspector's Report, 1995) which suggests that colleges need to review

their recruitment procedures, take more action to retain students and look to ways of deploying staff more efficiently. This staff/student ratio also makes it difficult to argue that colleges are under funded, with a government looking for less 'waste' in public services.

Colleges are responding with ever more 'high tec' management information systems capable of giving 'on-line' information about the number of student enrolments, attendance levels, staff deployment, room utilisation and any other data which has financial implications (FEFC, 1997b). Where there may have been arguments for deliberate restriction of class size in order to ensure that students received the individual support they might need to achieve qualifications, these arguments are now more difficult to make - the result could be the loss of someone's job or reduced funding available for equipment. Sporadic student attendance and high drop-out rates may also account for low average class size and ultimately to loss of 'on-course' and 'achievement' units of funding. As a result there has been an increased interest in the reasons behind some students' inability to attend regularly, or to complete their course (Hayes, 1996; McGivney, 1996; Martinez, 1997; Martinez, Houghton and Krupska, 1998), as I shall discuss later in this chapter. Although the concern may be raised by managers as a 'quality' issue, I suggest that it is motivated more by concerns about financial loss to the institution, than from concern that the individual student may have had a negative experience of education.

Through unit costing, it is possible for colleges to calculate how much money each student brings in and how much it costs to support their learning. Colleges are desperately seeking ways to maximise income while reducing expenses. As previously stated, the weighting of courses within the FEFC funding methodology and the additional sums available for additional learning support or crèche, in no way pay the cost of providing these services (Kennedy, 1997). Some very tough discussions are taking place. For example, cutting 'expensive' services such as college childcare services to re-cycle the money for the development of resource based learning which, it is argued, could benefit a larger number of people - (but not the same groups of people) (14); cutting 'expensive' courses which have high overheads such as technician and equipment costs, or which fail to attract sufficient students to be economically viable. Although the arguments being advanced to increase efficiency are, it is claimed, based on objective measures such as room usage and unit costing (15), there can be little doubt that subject hierarchies and student status will influence decisions. The rhetoric of 'value for money' standards of service has been slipped from the contract with the individual student or

'customer' and attached to the sponsor - central government, who claim that this is part of the proper accountability for public funds. The FEFC (1997c) has criticised standards, but also notes the difficulties that colleges are having with resourcing some practical subject areas where there is 'reduced availability of money for class materials and greater pressure on workshops' (FEFC, 1997c:7) and where the range of facilities available to students in the workplace is often more modern than colleges are able to provide. This poses difficult problems for college managers. If a curriculum area can not be adequately resourced and gains poor inspection grades, it may have to close.

Although colleges have been attempting to increase income and diversify their sources of funding through sponsorship, income generating services to business and earning overseas money, the majority are heavily dependent on public funding, yet cannot ensure that they will automatically be a priority for this money. The projections in the educational press suggest that following the initial period of growth funding, there will be a number of colleges which collapse under these sorts of financial pressures (TES, 23.3.96; THES, 23.3.96; TES 29.11.96; Independent 1.8.97).

RECRUITMENT

Increasing and widening participation

The declared aim of the 1993 - 1997 Conservative government was to raise levels of achievement, increase participation rates and establish a culture of lifelong education and training, with a view to increasing the competitiveness and productivity of the economy in an international climate (DfEE, 1995). Yet this was to be done with a minimal increase in public funding of education. The government expected education and training to be paid for increasingly by business (16) and individuals and introduced levers in terms of funding mechanisms to ensure that this took place.

In 1996 the FEFC established a committee chaired by Helena Kennedy QC with the remit to consider 'widening participation' in FE, to examine the barriers which prevent the achievement of the 'Learning Society' and to recommend to the Council how its strategies, including the funding methodology, could be developed both to increase and to improve the quality of

participation; how good practice could be shared and how the effect of its strategies might be monitored and evaluated.

Numerous studies including ACACE (1982), McGivney, (1990,1992), Sargant (1991,1993) and NIACE (1994) have revealed that the majority of adults who participate in education and training are those from higher socio-economic groups, those with extended initial education and those who are already in employment. Government statistics (DFE, 1993) show that particular groups, especially men from unskilled and manual working backgrounds, are under-represented in post school education. Amongst the over-lapping groups also under-represented across the range of post compulsory education and training are people without qualifications, unemployed people, some ethnic minority groups such as refugees, older learners, people with special needs and disabilities, people with literacy and numeracy difficulties, ex-offenders and some groups of women (Uden, 1996).

Uden's (1996) research has revealed that the number of older people benefiting from education and training is reducing at a time when older people are growing as a proportion of the population. Not only is this because many older people are not especially interested in participating in the certificated courses available in FE colleges (17), but also because of the contraction of adult and community education classes by LEAs, who have also been forced to reduce public spending (18). As women generally live longer than men, this means that older women have been disproportionately affected by changes in educational provision.

Whilst women form a high proportion of students in FE (19), there are some groups of women who are under represented - those with learning difficulties or disabilities, women with no qualifications and those who need support with basic skills, women from minority ethnic groups and lone parents (Uden, 1996). Yet these are the very groups of women who attended my college and became my key informants; who wanted to participate in education and proved that they could succeed. If governments and educators are serious about increasing the participation of these groups, there are some critical issues which must be addressed.

If widening participation is interpreted as increasing the participation rates of groups who have traditionally not used post compulsory education, then as McGivney (1990) has asserted, this has a cost attached. She correctly points out that to improve access for the most under-

represented groups, there needs to be institutional change including outreach programmes, less bureaucracy including the relaxation of staff/student ratios and resource allocation.

‘Work with non-participant groups is, inevitably, more time-consuming, more labour intensive and hence more expensive than catering for a known and established clientele’ (McGivney, 1990:9)

This is because participation is not merely an issue of publicity, programming and physical access. Engagement in education and training opportunities has to appear relevant to an individual’s life (McGivney, 1990). Crowder’s (1995) study similarly found that non-participants will only engage in formal learning if they are persuaded to reject their belief that it is of no use to them. Pressurising them into activities (for example through government schemes) and onto courses is not likely to make them change their views.

Lack of personal time, or the inflexibility of course timing, have often been cited as reasons for non-participation (ACACE, 1982; McGivney, 1990). The popularity of Open University courses is a measure of the preference some people have to learn at times convenient to themselves. The increase in modular courses has been, in part, a response to providing courses in a mode which is more convenient for some people. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, my own research indicates that some women who would like to extend their education, find it difficult to find time to study (in colleges or at home) because of social and psychological constraints on their time. I am not aware of any publicly voiced strategies to deal with the issues which would support their increased participation.

In the early years following incorporation, many colleges sought to expand the numbers of students enrolled in order to gain the additional ‘growth’ funding that was available. There was optimism in colleges that the additional moneys which could be claimed for giving students additional learning support (ALS) and subsidising nursery provision would support growth and the inclusion of new groups into their communities (20). The sudden ending of the DLE funding in 1997 and the realisation that the moneys available for ALS and childcare were a mere drop in the ocean of need and went very little way to meet the full costs, has led to colleges taking very serious stock about what support they can provide. From January 1997 the educational press carried numerous articles about the possible consequences of the sudden ending of DLE funding e.g. Guardian 28.1.97 pg. 7, Financial Times 28.1.97 pg. 12, THES 31.1.97 pg. 3. The TES 21.2.97 pg. 23, reported that the FEFC was asking colleges to comment on various proposals to help pay for student places; options included halting funding

on certain types of courses and giving priority to statutory provision such as courses for 16 - 19 year olds. Thus provision such as childcare and counselling which generated marginal funding units and required substantial financial input from colleges was put in jeopardy (21).

In the current climate it is highly unlikely that colleges will be active in their attempts to attract students from 'hard to reach' sectors of the community unless they can attract additional project funding. It is interesting to note that the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Welsh FEFC have pioneered financial incentives to reward colleges for recruiting students from socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. (22) At the time that the Tomlinson (FEFC, 1996) and Kennedy (1997) reports are pushing colleges to widen participation, colleges are looking for ways to reduce costs and the cost of recruiting and supporting students from under-represented groups may not appear an attractive business proposition unless additional funds are provided. Amongst the Kennedy Committee's early conclusions was that,

'Market principles alone will not achieve widening participation quickly enough, new systems of student financial support must be created' and that 'funding is the most important lever for achieving change' (FEFC, 1997:8)

The Committee urged the FEFC to develop its funding arrangements in order to accelerate widening participation. Where will funds be found? The government argues that it is making adequate, funding available to the sector, it is up to local college management to prioritise how it is spent, ensure efficiency and meet priorities and targets (23). There are opportunities for all!

Why widen participation?

Why should more people participate in FE ? Liberal adult educators, feminists, industrialists, politicians, college managers and students will all have their own arguments. In fact what emerges is a complex web of different agendas and priorities in tension with each other. Uden (1996) asks some key questions,

'If, for example, the only motive is to improve the skills of the workforce in order to improve competitiveness then the recent massive loss of learning opportunities for retired people is not a worry. If the purpose is to improve the skills of current employees then the continual denial of opportunity to the unemployed by harsh interpretations of the 16/21 Hour Rule is not a problem. If the purpose is to train only that part of the workforce which will actually be called upon to deploy higher level skills in the near future, then the virtual

exclusion of a significant proportion from the new National Targets could be a rational decision' (Uden, 1996:21)

The women in my study were attempting to find personal fulfilment, establish careers (not just get jobs), raise their status, improve their socio-economic position, be good mothers and contribute to the wider society. Yet what recognition is there of the importance of education which equips people for roles in society of equal value to paid work? What role should education play in challenging received wisdom and building new knowledge? Where is the investment to ensure that equality of opportunity is more than empty policy statements? When will it be recognised that supporting women returners is a long term investment?

The Kennedy Committee in *Pathways to Success*, (FEFC, 1997) argued that the case for widening participation is strong and recognises the role that FE plays in relation to citizenship and personal development, as well as vocational training for employment.

'The economic success of the country will depend upon maximising the potential of all. Drawing upon the talents of an educational elite, or even an educated majority, will not be enough. Social cohesion will only be achieved if the capacity of everyone to contribute to and benefit from the social, cultural and personal dimensions of their lives is developed through learning' (FEFC, 1997:4)

Yet what is being funded to date, is an ever increasingly narrow form of vocationalism, which has been pointed out by a number of professionals involved in adult learning including Alan Tuckett, director of NIACE in his response to the Government consultation document on *Lifetime Learning* (TES, 8.12.1995 pg. 23).

The evidence to Kennedy (including early findings from this study) led Kennedy to state in her introduction to '*Pathways to Success*', that FE:

'engaged people in their wider community, enabling them to have a better appreciation of what makes the world tick. It influenced learners' attitudes to the education of their own children' (FEFC, 1997:1)

Yet what does that mean in terms of the educational opportunities available to women? In particular what challenges are being mounted against an education system which frequently re-enforces gendered stereotypes (Skeggs, 1988) and often fails to recognise differences between women and their unequal access to resources? How are women being given opportunities to 'make the future' for themselves and their children in the 'New FE'?

Marketing and admissions

As I have discussed earlier in this study, in the years of growth following incorporation, colleges have increased their intake of students (McGivney, 1996) and looked to new markets (FEFC, 1997c) to meet their growth targets and benefit from increased funding. Most colleges began to invest heavily in market research and publicity, sometimes at the expense of more direct and 'personal' recruitment methods such as community outreach workers. Observation of FE publicity materials, over a period of years, reveals an increasing 'glossification' (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995), as I discussed in chapter 2. The expenditure on marketing and publicity as reported in published college annual reports, indicates the level of investment that colleges are making in this area.

'Marketing' and 'Services to Business' units spend time and energy on identifying opportunities and niche markets, influencing perceptions about what the college can deliver and positioning the college within the local education and training market. This may well mean that students will be recruited from groups who have already achieved some educational success.

At the same time the end of DLE means that over recruitment, with no funding provided for the over achievement of units, is as dangerous as under recruitment. Thus the need for education and training has to link with business objectives and there are therefore pockets of need, such as those of many of the traditional non-participant groups, which are not prioritised (unless as in Wales it is part of the FEFC funding methodology or there is special project funding available). The pressure is to achieve enough applications to be able to select sufficient 'good' students and fill programmes. When this has failed, the next desperate move is 'poaching' students from other colleges. In summer 1996 the TES and THES both ran articles on poaching of students by FE and HE institutions. The TES reported,

'poaching has always been a problem. But it has escalated this year because universities and colleges which fail to hit recruitment targets face stiff financial penalties' (TES, 1996:1).

The scramble for students had become so desperate that FE colleges who had actively recruited students turned down by universities, later had those students poached back by university admissions tutors, who dropped entry requirements in order to fill their courses. The TES warned of a situation where students who thought they had a place might end up stranded if

institutions closed financially unviable courses. Whilst recognising the improved responsiveness of colleges and the growth in student numbers, the Kennedy Committee also commented on the,

‘wasteful competition as providers have competed for those students most likely to take part and succeed’ (FEFC, 1997:4)

So the issue for college managers is not necessarily recruiting more students, but recruiting the ‘right’ students. The ‘right students’ in business terms, have money to pay for income generating courses, or attract money through ESF or FEFC funding. They are skilled learners and can be APL’d or self access learning materials to ‘fast track’ achievement with minimal input from lecturing staff. They have clear personal goals and high motivation. They have no need for counselling, childcare or other costly support services. They complete their ‘primary learning goals’, achieving high grades and they progress to HE or employment. They continue to use the college throughout their adult lives, to top up their skills, or they send their employees on courses. They make generous donations to the ‘Friends of the College appeal’. However, they also have high expectations, read their college charter, and do not hesitate to complain about the quality of services.

The ‘wrong students’ are on low incomes and find it difficult to pay the fees, but are not eligible for concessions. They are claiming benefits and may need to be ‘actively seeking work’. They have low self confidence, require subsidised childcare, and make substantial use of the student support services. They may also need additional learning support in basic skills and language. Their lives impinge on their studies and they attend intermittently, needing extra help or time to complete assignments. They transfer to a different course part way through the year. They take ‘learning breaks’. **They are the women in my research** . However, they do succeed - they gain qualifications, and increased socio-economic status. They promote education through word of mouth, they contribute to the learning community, they give back to society far more than has been invested in them by the state.

The more colleges market themselves to appeal to the ‘right students’ with glossy publications and the attributes of business, the less easy it becomes for students with low confidence to seek access. Crossing the college threshold is a major step for many of these women, as has been revealed through my interviews with staff and students. Imposing entrances, uniformed staff

and security systems are additional obstacles to people who lack confidence and feel that 'Education's for Other People' (McGivney, 1990).

There is no need to take a policy decision to exclude some groups. Enrolment by Fax or telephone, payment by credit card, communicating by E-mail and 'surfing the net' to find course details, suits the life style and pockets of those who have already achieved.

The evidence of my research with mature women, is that a positive experience of returning to college results in a culture of learning developing within the immediate and extended family. The women often continued to study (with learning breaks) over long periods, they actively encouraged those around them to enrol on courses. I believe that making returning to education easier for mature women would be a powerful way of increasing participation and a step nearer to creating the learning society. However, this would be a long term investment and I suspect that colleges will continue to invest in ever more expensive and sophisticated marketing to achieve short term goals.

Admissions policies and practice

Reisenberger and Sadler (1997) have discussed the growth of centralised guidance and admissions units with dedicated staff, within FE colleges and Martinez (1997) presents some different admissions models employed within the FE sector. Increasingly, trained guidance staff provide pre-course and on-course support and information about progression to work or further study.

Admissions staff need to find a balance between reducing barriers to access and using screening procedures which attempt to measure students' skills and identify areas of academic weakness, so that they can be guided onto appropriate courses and given any additional learning support which may be required. Failure to identify learning support needs at an early stage, may jeopardise a student's ability to cope with their coursework, but too threatening a selection process may erode fragile confidence. Cleo received pre-course advice and guidance on several occasions, over a period of seven or eight years, before she finally enrolled on a course.

' I'd get as far as going to the careers officer and then I'd go back to square one just working and working and earning a wage. [...] I think that for anyone going back to

education, you know, it may be your dream and you say' "Oh yes", but it may be quite a long process. It's not going to be easy, you know, you can't just jump into a diploma or a degree obviously and you have to start from the bottom, which is a bit off putting you know. I don't think anybody means to put you off but it depends on how you feel at the time' (Cleo, interview)

Staff recognise that access to information and high quality pre-entry advice and guidance increases the recruitment of students onto appropriate courses and adds to the likelihood of successful completion. However, there is a constant tension between giving potential students a realistic idea of the personal demands that courses will make on them and frightening off less confident individuals. Also, in the current competitive environment, staff may feel under pressure to reach enrolment targets for student recruitment and minimise discussion with students about the demands that becoming a student will make both in college, but perhaps more importantly in the light of my research, on their home lives. A college counsellor who supports students (including some of the women in my study) who are experiencing stress told me,

'I've been finding people coming onto courses - taking rather an instant decision to come onto the course, if there was a place on the course, without having actually thought through the implications for them' (Marina, Interview)

Yet failure to fully discuss students' aspirations and course requirements, may allow students to have false expectations which could lead to early withdrawal, or poor achievement with consequent loss of revenue for the college, apart from the loss of self esteem or confidence in the education system that the student may experience. Payne and Edwards (1997) have discussed the recent growth in provision of in-house college guidance. Their research reveals a complex picture in which impartiality is only one aspect of guidance and there is the possibility in practice, of different interpretations of an institution's professional codes and quality frameworks.

The search for more effective recruitment procedures has driven some of the research into student retention, with managers looking for indicators as to the characteristics of the 'successful student'. Martinez (1997) suggests that reliable and robust procedures can be established to identify students at risk of dropping out (24). However, McGivney's (1996) research eloquently discusses the problems involved in trying to discern trends in current retention and achievement data. She argues that past performance is not a good prediction of future outcomes and warns against attempts to devise a typology of students likely to be vulnerable to early withdrawal. My own research findings similarly demonstrate that a poor

academic record in initial education and perhaps non-completion of courses in adulthood, does not necessarily mean that an individual will not be successful in terms of both institutional outcomes and personal learning goals - they may however need extra time and support.

Most FE colleges in England use screening or diagnostic tests for some or all of their full time students, in order to place them on appropriate courses, or identify learner or learning support needs (BSA, 1996). Testing, screening and otherwise selecting students according to their previous academic achievement, current competencies, personality profile or personal circumstance, in order to provide appropriate academic support, is only the first part of the experience of returning to education. However thorough the pre-entry system, it is unlikely to prepare students for the challenge of becoming a mature student. One admissions tutor told me how concerned she was that some students when interviewed and tested, appeared to have the appropriate skills to complete a course successfully, but later had difficulties,

‘What I feel worst about is when a student isn't coping because perhaps they thought they could, they even screened in any screening or assessing we did, they seemed to be able to cope’ (Samantha, interview).

Yet the blame tends to fall back on the staff or the student. Is it that staff are accepting students in order to fill their courses? Is it that recruitment procedures are inadequate? Are staff giving non-standard entry students the benefit of the doubt? Is it that adult students have become skilled at hiding their academic weaknesses? (25) Is it that there are some people who given every opportunity, still fail? These are the types of questions that are being asked in colleges (26), thus one consequence of implementing government policy to recruit and retain more students may be to identify colleges or students as inadequate.

Central policy making has resulted in a narrowing of choice for women students, especially those with few initial qualifications. The easy access ‘leisure’ and non accredited courses, which many of the women in my study had used as a first step back into education, have reduced with the shrinking of local authority adult education and a shift in FE away from non-certificated courses. Those students who do apply for college courses, may be offered good initial advice and guidance, on course support and opportunities to progress to higher levels, or they may be deemed too high risk to be given a second chance of education.

Rhetoric and reality - college responses to increasing recruitment and widening participation

The Government's consultation document *Lifetime Learning* (DfEE, 1995) begins with a basic principle,

'the learning market should be driven by customers and their choices, not by providers and other organisations' DfEE (1995:10)

The 1992 FHE Act and the resultant expansion of the New FE would appear to offer educational opportunities backed up by promises of responsiveness and customer service in the Student Charters. Yet in practice, it is the accrediting bodies and the government itself that are driving provision. The public (particularly disadvantaged groups) has very little choice in what and how they learn.

If you wish to become a full time adult student studying a course in FE, you will be unlikely to get a grant and will lose unemployment benefit. If you work part time you will not be eligible for concessionary fees. If you are unemployed and in receipt of state benefit, you can enrol for a nil fee however, you also need to demonstrate that you are 'actively seeking work'. If you enrol on a course to improve your employability, you lose your benefits unless you are studying for less than 16 hours per week and you need to state that you will give up the course if you find a job. If you do leave the course early because you have managed to find employment, your 'primary learning goal', this is regarded by the FEFC funding mechanism to be a 'drop out' and the college is censured for its poor retention rates, rather than rewarded for enabling 'early completion'. If you are a mother you will not be expected to be 'actively seeking work', but you will need to fit your education around your caring commitments. The inadequate state nursery provision in Britain means that you will be unlikely to get a nursery place and colleges are finding it increasingly difficult to fund their own childcare provision - even though the FEFC makes a payment towards childcare (27). You will also have to pay for materials and equipment, travel, accommodation, food and find time and energy to study outside course hours.

It is no surprise that the issue which generated the largest response to the Kennedy Committee's call for evidence, was student financial support.

'We recognise the widespread concern raised: particular aspects of the current arrangements, for childcare, discretionary awards, travel and transport and learning while

receiving benefits were singled out; in addition, the inconsistency, inequity and confusion of the arrangements as a whole were put forward as a key area for attention.

We are agreed that the current arrangements are wholly unsatisfactory and act as a barrier and disincentive to participation. New systems must be created which encourage and support engagement in learning. The committee has also agreed that an increase in funds is essential' (FEFC, 1997:6)

So whilst there are claims of more opportunities and choice for the individual, this is within a culture of competition and the pursuit of personal advantage, where some social groups have reduced chances and choices. Conservative, and now Labour, social policy has actively deprived many disadvantaged people of availing themselves of educational opportunities (28); furthermore these people have been stereotyped as feckless and responsible for their own position. The public have been tricked with a sleight of hand which seems to offer opportunities and rewards for those who reach out - and yet for the majority the cards are stacked and 'choice' is a mocking illusion. Therefore, although the New Right ideology has a rhetoric of 'choice', this has to be seen within a context of inequality. The capacity to 'choose' implies that people have a degree of control over their lives and that decisions are informed. Many people do not take up educational opportunities because of the costs involved, or because they cannot see what relevance it has to their lives. Some students leave courses early because of force of circumstance, or because they have become disillusioned. 'Choice' is therefore limited by material circumstances and by hegemonic processes. However, while there are those who blame themselves for their inability to access and successfully complete a course of study, there are others who are able to penetrate the hegemony. It also needs to be recognised that non-participation is not merely a failure to access the education system, it can also be a positive choice to reject the system which fails to value a specific history and culture. As McGivney's (1990) research into non-participation in education revealed, 'considerable anger and hostility' (McGivney 1996:27) was felt towards an education system which was seen to be trying to impose and uphold values of a particular class and culture. Non-participation may not therefore imply antipathy towards education so much as to the nature of the education on offer.

As I have already argued, in order to secure their own futures in the market, colleges are desperately looking for ways of maintaining their student numbers whilst cutting the costs of service delivery. Responses include a rapid growth in part-time and modular programmes and investment in resource based learning centres and distance learning materials (29) which will allow maximum flexibility of attendance for students who are finding it increasingly difficult to find the time and money to study. It could be argued that this is an example of the educational

programme being shaped by customer choice - and yet, I believe that these changes are not based on research into preferred learning styles so much as a pragmatic response to government pressure on colleges.

Thus, if the result of increasingly aggressive recruitment drives and curriculum re-modelling, is that the overall number of students successfully completing FE courses increases, but that some social groups are under-represented, then this can be justified within the ideology of the market.

‘the crucial role of the free market is not to emancipate the entrepreneur but to chastise the feckless, an instrument not of liberation but discipline’ (Edgar, 1996:76)

If reaching ‘new’ people, particularly from the non-traditional participant groups is resource intensive, then an increase in student numbers must come from ‘customer loyalty’. In practice, increased participation is being interpreted as ensuring continuing participation by people from the groups who already have a history of participation, rather than participation by a greater cross section of the community - adult students (especially those who know how to learn) are therefore the ‘Klondike of the future’ (30).

Overall therefore, despite the rhetoric of Student Charters, student power within the New FE is minimal in terms of influencing the decision making processes. As Ball (1990) so accurately states, New Right policies confine themselves to a particular form of customer choice; ‘there is no room for voice’ (Ball, 1990:10). Student power is limited to choices about joining or leaving courses.

RETENTION

The publication of the HMI report on Student Completion Rates (DES, 1991), Measuring Up: Performance Indicators in FE (SOED, 1992) and Unfinished Business (Audit Commission/Ofsted, 1993) drew attention to the fact that a significant number of students failed to complete their courses. The drop out rates across the sector were identified as being too high and condemned as a waste of public money. The UK Funding Council’s inspection and funding frameworks were introduced very soon afterwards and were designed to give effect to the recommendations contained in these reports. Colleges would receive funding for those

students who successfully completed their courses and institutional performance would be made public (FEFC, 1997a). Withdrawal rates have therefore become indicators of efficiency and success at the course or institutional level and linked to reputation and solvency. Martinez (1995) has argued that the issue of non-completion has moved from being one of relative unimportance, with an acceptance that some 'drop-out' was inevitable, to a position of national prominence with individual colleges expected to make substantial improvements to their completion rates.

'It is not the consequences of withdrawal on individual students but external pressures on providers that are forcing institutions to face the issue' (McGivney, 1996:13)

Martinez (1995) and McGivney (1996) have discussed problems concerning accuracy of data collection on student retention, drawing attention to the reluctance of institutions to release this information and the differences in the way they define and calculate non-completion. Whilst this is an issue to be addressed in terms of research into completion rates across the sector, my concern here is to discuss 'retention' in relation to the lives of the women in my study and consider how their needs are being met, in the action that colleges are taking to improve completion rates. In what follows, I shall consider attitudes to women students' ability to 'cope' with returning to education and argue that many of the problems which colleges identify as 'practical' or 'personal' and are seen as individual weaknesses, are complex sets of issues which are the result of patriarchal relations and the way that the educational offer is structured - the impacting of government social and education policy. I will argue that in reality many of the aspects which some lecturers and students define as 'personal' and consider to be outside the professional contract, are in fact central to a positive learning experience. I shall discuss the importance of relationships within the educational environment and an holistic approach to student support and argue that this is being threatened by the insertion of market ideology and the commodification of education.

What is 'completion' and why do some students leave before the end of the course?

If a student leaves a course early because she feels disaffected with education, or has lost confidence in her ability to learn, this is obviously a bad thing. The women in my research more often blamed themselves than the college, if they 'could not cope' with studying. As McGivney (1996) points out, 'non-traditional' learners who have previously had negative

school experiences, are likely to have their earlier feelings of inadequacy and failure reinforced. However, if a student leaves because she has met her own learning goals, or needs to take a break from education in order to concentrate on other aspects of her life, this is a problem for the institution but not the student. It is particularly galling for colleges to be penalised for success; students on vocational courses leaving early to take up employment, or students who have gained places in HE leaving in order to earn enough money to support themselves at university now that grants are scarce (31).

A great deal of care needs to be taken when interpreting the results of student surveys, or 'official' reasons given by students to college staff about their withdrawal from courses. Students will often give a pragmatic response, especially if the lecturer asking them about their non-attendance is the cause of the problem. They are also likely to respond in a way which will protect their self esteem. As McGivney (1996) has noted, many questionnaires require one box to be ticked, yet the reasons for students' decisions not to finish a course are often complex and relate to the accumulated stress of a number of different issues. The reasons may also be, as previously described, deeply personal and related to their roles and relationships outside college. Morag had financial and family problems which added to the pressures of being a student.

'I did an Access course here but I didn't complete that. At that point it was just too much. It was too much to read. It was too much to do. It was too much homework. I did small sections of it. I did the study skills, I did women's studies. I didn't do the whole thing. I did psychology as well for a couple of terms, but there was so much of it and there were other things going on as well.' (Morag, interview)

'Unable to cope' is a phrase often used by lecturers and students about people who leave courses early, but what does this really mean and is there anything that colleges could or should do to prevent 'drop out' ? A shortage of money, lack of time or childcare problems, appear frequently as the reasons for stress whilst being a mature student and for leaving courses prematurely (McGivney, 1996; Frank and Houghton, 1997). Whilst these are very real practical issues, they have deeper and more complex roots related to socially constructed notions of women's roles, within their particular cultures, as I have already argued.

Despite the plethora of research projects and conferences on student retention which have grown in the past few years (32), I believe that there is still a reluctance for college managers to engage with the deeper issues, revealed by my research, which concern patriarchal relations,

women's preferred learning styles and their need for support to help them manage personal change. The situation in general has been that,

'FE managers have not addressed the problem, but have developed procedures for coping with its effects: sanctioning initial over-enrolment, and instituting reviews of class sizes when drop-out has taken its toll' (Mansell and Parkin, 1990 unpaginated draft)

I believe that this approach continues with courses being cut up into shorter units and flexible open learning options being offered, which appear to place the needs of the student central, but are also ways in which the negative effects of student withdrawal can be minimised for the institution.

Poverty and keeping one step ahead of the Department of Social Security

There are external issues which affect students' ability to attend and successfully complete courses, which arise from government social policy.

'I'm living off income support at the moment. No part time job earns you enough to be off income support - you end up being more in debt. As soon as you get a job you have to pay your rent totally and not partially and then you have tax. It just becomes horrendous. When I need to buy clay I do the odd bit of sewing which is cash in hand I'm afraid. If I earn a lot I declare it but if it's only ten or fifteen quid, I don't say anything' (Lizzie, interview)

Colleges have made representations through the Association of Colleges and the FEFC concerning in particular student finance and eligibility for state benefits. The Kennedy Committee received more evidence on the deterrent effect of the benefits system than on almost any other subject (FE Now, June, 1997). Colleges have found ways to provide 'hardship funds' (33) and support to students in their dealings with the Department of Social Security (DSS), but are generally as much victims of policies as are the students.

McGivney's (1996) analysis of research into student withdrawals found that unsurprisingly, unemployed students and those with financial problems, were consistently identified as groups with relatively high non-completion rates. In a survey conducted as part of my study 60% of the students on substantial part-time courses, and over a third on part time courses said that at some point during the course they had considered leaving for financial related reasons. Concerns about money was also a frequently occurring code in my interviews (twenty eight references in eight interviews, Fig. 4 pg. 97).

'I started in September and that was only the twelve week 'First Steps' course and although it was going really well I thought. I can't do this. I just can't afford to do this. In the end I thought well hang on, it will be worth it in the end. Still money is quite tight and it's going to be like that for quite a few years, let's face it' (Morag, interview)

The range of financial problems mature students face is detailed by Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992).

However and importantly, (as discussed in chapter 4) women are more likely to suffer from poverty than men. The women in my study were constantly having to make choices about how they prioritised time and money.

'It's expensive and anything that causes financial problems puts a strain on everything.[...] Talking to some of the people on my course now, some of them are going mad, they can't cope and I think they ought to think about their expenses - what are priorities and what aren't' (Lizzie, interview).

'Time and money, there's never enough of either. Its work and your studying suffers, or go on the dole and suffer' (full time student, survey data).

For many female students, it is a constant balancing act between wanting to study and needing to earn money. One student who had left a previous course early gave as her reason the need,

'to take up employment as I could no longer afford to take time out' (full time student, survey data).

An Educational Guidance worker who advises students on finance and DSS (34) regulations agrees,

'A lot of students have said to me "I really don't think I'll bother any more, I'll give it all up and get a job", or they think, I'll go part time and they won't bother me. That's something that's really getting worse and it won't be because the benefit officers change, certainly locally they're very helpful [...] I think that they're going to be under such constraint from above that to be flexible will be much more difficult' (Patricia, interview).

The knock-on effect for students of not having adequate finances is that they can not afford child care, travel, decent accommodation, not to mention course materials. In her study of women students at a large northern, inner-city university Berry (1995) found that they cut corners including going short on food, heat and other essentials and suggests that this may affect their physical and mental health, cause anxiety and may limit horizons and eventually lead to drop-out (35). Several of the women in my study had part time employment, mostly 'off the books' in order to survive as parent/students. They often experienced feelings of guilt that

they were making their children 'go without' in the present, although their return to college was often motivated by a wish to provide a better life for their children in the future.

Shortage of money and the consequent difficult choices many women students have to make, is therefore a considerable source of stress.

Last term saw an increase in the number of students who are facing threats of benefit loss as a result of taking up study. In some cases students have actually had their benefit stopped [...] A much more serious issue concerns the claimant advisor's interpretation of the student's availability and actively seeking work attempt. I believe the rules governing these interpretations have been tightened up and this will bring increasing problems for our students. (College Bulletin , Feb. 95)

Describing the situation of being a mature student one woman described her problem as,

'constant battles with Social Security regarding whether or not I'm available for work. I feel forced to lie' (female, part time student, survey)

Not telling the truth and the fear of being caught out is stressful. In the case study college one student was taken to court and lost her housing benefit. In terms of external pressures on students, college managers know that women with children will not be 'chased' by the DSS to find employment, but may have domestic and caring responsibilities which could affect their attendance and may need financial assistance (36). Many colleges have support staff who can advise on benefits regulations and help students make applications to charities for grants. Some students are eligible for a small grant from the DfEE Access fund. A number of colleges have their own bursary funds. Student finance is a key issue identified by the Kennedy Committee in relation to widening participation. The question will be as to where the money will be found - more cash from the Treasury, levers on colleges to find funds from within their own budget allocations, or re-distribution of funds between the FE and HE sectors ? (37).

It may be possible for students who need to take up employment to transfer from a full-time or substantial part-time course to a part-time or evening mode, or study using open learning packages. These options are more likely to suit men, or women without family commitments.

Often the support that helps women students to cope with poverty and stress is the practical help of friends, family and other students and the emotional support provided by concerned lecturers. Sometimes the problems are too great and they leave; if they do, it is unlikely that they will be credited with partial achievement, a weakness noted by McGivney (1996), although theoretically they could claim Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the future,

except that the preparation of the requisite portfolio of evidence, is time consuming and demoralising for the student and costly for colleges to support (Fraser, 1995) (38).

Accommodation and a quiet place to study

Accommodation was a major issue for the students in my study (mentioned thirteen times). For students who become homeless or have significant housing problems during their period of study, this obviously dominates their thoughts and can often result in them leaving their courses. College staff may advise on the most appropriate agencies to contact, but there is little more that colleges can do.

Many students, including several in my study, find it difficult to find a quiet place to study away from family and noisy neighbours. Providing these facilities in college can help some students, but for many mature women students their caring commitments and consequent constraints on time, make accessing these places very difficult.

'Accommodation problems' presented by students, can often mean far more than housing issues. On further investigation it can turn out to be caused by the breakdown of a relationship with the added trauma that brings. The case of a student who approached Student Services for help to obtain money to pay for accommodation for the last term of her course, is an example of this,

'She had been very capable, an Australian girl.....but her engagement broke up in April and she went to pieces and we were writing this letter and she was streaming tears all over it. I said to her you will get this money and you could see it was the whole relationship that had thrown this woman completely upside down from being very confident to completely going to pieces and obviously she was getting a lot of support from the Art Department. So yes, there was a real practical problem there. I think he might have been supporting her and there were obvious difficulties' (Patricia, interview)

From this we begin to see that although students may be facing 'practical' problems, these may have arisen out of complex personal situations which are highly stressful for the individuals and affect their ability to cope with college work. Where there is the emotional and practical support of staff and other students, the college may be a life-line. At the presentation of awards for outstanding adult learners, a lecturer remarked that it was amazing that some students completed courses despite the string of dreadful things that had occurred in their lives

(field notes, National Adult Learners Week, May 1996). I would suggest that in such circumstances, it may be the positive experience of the course and the support that students find in college relationships, that help them to cope not only with the course but in their lives in general.

External pressures of work and family

For students like Marilyn, who are in paid employment, the demands of work can impinge on their study time. There may be the chance of over-time, a change of shift pattern, promotion, seasonal demand, maternity or sick cover. There are other students such as Lizzie and Geraldine, who rely on casual work which is undeclared, in order to supplement state benefits, and pay for books, course materials or every day living expenses.

For women students there is often the additional expectation that as primary carers, they will forgo their classes in order to look after a sick relative, take the children to the dentist, the cat to the vet and deal with all the other 'family health' matters not to mention their own health. Living from day to day is obviously a strain in itself, but it may also lead to missed sessions and gaps in knowledge which will need to be filled in if the course is to be successfully completed.

Intermittent attendance, may result in a student getting behind with her work and feeling that she will not be able to catch up and regain her sense of belonging to the course. This is supported by a number of studies including Cullen, (1994). She may also feel embarrassed and guilty about being away and find it difficult to face the lecturer. Wilkinson (1982) found that apprehension about returning to college after continuity of study was lost, often resulted in withdrawal from a course.

The effects of discontinuity of study can be mitigated by revision or distance learning materials being made available by colleges. The problem is that the most vulnerable and hard pressed students, are those least likely to have video machines or computers with CD drives at home, or additional time available to come into college to catch up. For a number of the women in my study, it would require considerable re-organisation of their lives and the co-operation of others, outside college, for them to be able to make use of such facilities. Critically,

Morrison's (1992) research confirms that for women students with families, college time was class contact time.

The college experience as a contributory factor in non-completion

McGivney (1996) has commented that the prevalence of non-academic factors among the reasons that mature students give for leaving courses early, could lead to colleges being complacent about their services. Certainly there has been a slowness by colleges to consider that retention might be linked to a bad classroom experience, probably supported by the reluctance of students to give lecturers negative feedback and the tendency for some students to blame themselves for the situation.

Under achievement and 'drop-out' has often been linked to a deficiency in the student such as poor study skills, lack of ability, 'home pressures', lack of commitment. Recent research projects into student retention in FE indicate that the quality of teaching and learning is a significant factor (Martinez, 1995, 1997) as well as the quality of learner and learning support. However, whilst I agree with many of the strategies suggested to improve completion rates and have contributed to their formulation (Hayes, 1996), they may fail to address some deeper issues which my study of mature women students has revealed to be important.

Despite the increasing numbers of mature women students, colleges and educational structures pay little heed to the patterns of women's lives and the ways in which their time is circumscribed by the needs of others. A few crèche places and the odd course (often an Access course) that allows children to be taken to and collected from school, are the usual gestures. Often insufficient thought is given to the way that women feel about themselves as learners, their experiences and concerns and their preferred learning styles. Educationalists have been more concerned with the problems that students, and women in particular, bring to them, than with the problems that educational institutions may be responsible for creating (McIntosh, 1981; Osborn et al, 1984). In addition, I suggest that they have often failed to understand the complexity and inter-relationship of the issues facing mature students. By looking at the student and not the person we forget that for mature students,

'education is squeezed in at the margins of life, especially for women'
(Alan Tuckett, NIACE Conference, May 95)

Different value systems can be discerned within the complexity of what follows. Colleges have to manage the tension between meeting students needs (and thereby retaining them) and meeting the narrow requirements of funding bodies. Women students have to find ways to skill and empower themselves within an education system which privileges male values (such as competition and values formally acquired knowledge over experience), despite the rhetoric of 'widening participation' and 'the learning society'.

'Threshold fear', lack of confidence and stress

A number of studies (including Mansell and Parkin, 1990; FEU 1994; Martinez, 1997) have highlighted the importance of good initial advice, guidance and induction so that students are clear about course demands and support services available to them and are therefore less likely to withdraw early. Certainly with the support of FEFC funding, this is an area where colleges have made considerable improvements to the benefit of students.

Earlier in this study I discussed the feelings that the women had about themselves as learners and the considerable fear some of them had about educational 'failure'. 'Threshold fear' makes it very difficult for students to find the confidence to enter a college and make initial enquiries, complete application forms and attend interviews.

'I was really quite scared. I didn't know if I was capable of learning' (Nicola, interview)

Some students have so little self confidence, that they believe that the only reason they have been given a place on a course is that the college made a mistake, or failed to spot their weaknesses. One of the women in my study told me how she nearly 'dropped-out' before she had even started the course,

'I thought of not coming after I was accepted on the course [...] I suppose there's fear of failure, isn't there. [...] I didn't want to go to college about three or four weeks before. I said "I'm only doing this because there's nothing else for me to do, I don't want to do it" [...] I couldn't understand it. I'd been looking forward to the interview. I'd come and got a place and suddenly it was really strange. I think you have to work through that and the way I did it was to say I'd give it a month and if I don't like it, I'll leave, but of course in that time I came here and I loved it' (Lorna, interview)

What is revealed here is not merely a gender issue, 'lack of confidence' is also an expression of anxiety; students may feel that they are operating in an alien environment where their working

class background, or ethnic identity, single them out as being different or 'lacking' (Reay, 1996). Not only may they feel that they may be stereotyped, but they may also suffer direct discrimination. Members of minority ethnic groups experience racism at an individual and structural level. Returning to education may for them have the added concern about discrimination and abuse. The range of concerns is well illustrated by the comments of a Ugandan Asian student who returned to college to study mathematics, psychology and literature,

'When I joined the course, one of my greatest worries was what kind of tutors would I have? I had heard of many cases where tutors would enter the class and deliver their knowledge brusquely and then walk out. My fears were unfounded in this case, as at the end of every lecture there is tutorial time to discuss in private, any problem arising from the subject just learnt. The second worry I had, was to do with the reactions of other students to me and how would I cope if any of them made a racist remark to me. I was so glad that such a case never arose! Everyone has treated me very well. My third worry was academically related. After twelve years without having had any formal education, my greatest fear was that I had become 'antique' as such I might not be able to take in new ideas and concepts' (Access student essay)

Lack of confidence and stress are words that arise again and again in conversations with staff and students, (stress was mentioned thirty times in nine interviews and lack of confidence fifty six times in ten interviews). As I discussed earlier in this study, these fears continue for some students who remain anxious, often concerned that they will be publicly humiliated about what they do not know, or can not do, as they may have been in the past.

Women students in particular may display symptoms of lack of confidence, reluctance to contribute in class, concern over assignments. Lecturers have to balance academic rigour with the encouragement of people who may feel inadequate or threatened. The following comments from students are typical,

'I have been exposed to all my inadequacies' (Access student, essay)

'If I go back to the first day we came in, in a huge room with people you don't know. You don't feel at ease to talk out in the class. When you have to stand up and give your first presentation, that's so nerve racking, you can hear your voice and you're shaking with nerves' (Morag, interview)

'It's fear of failure. It's sort of like, you know, I don't know whether anyone ever loses it - that feeling when you hand in an essay it's going to come back covered in red ink' (Cleo, interview)

A reluctance to contribute, or challenge the views of others in class does, however, need to be placed within a cultural framework. It may not be an indicator of personal confidence so much

as behaviour within a cultural norm, where in some cases women are expected to take a passive role, as within for example some Muslim families (Ashfar, 1994).

Students may feel they cannot cope with the work, even though staff say there are no grounds for such concern (Moore, 1995:25). Or they may not recognise how much they have achieved - sometimes this may be because lecturers do not give sufficient feedback and sometimes students are unable to hear positive feedback, or to own it:

'Some of the students have done amazing work, but they have little recognition of these skills' (Dawn, interview)

The self doubt that some students feel may be the result of receiving negative feedback from school and family over a long period. Difficulty in owning intellectual skills is also deeply embedded within working class identity (Bhavnani, 1993; Luttrell, 1993; Reay, 1996). The building of confidence and feelings of self worth, are unlikely to develop without support. It may be that the lack of support at home, coupled with self doubt, will result in the student giving up and leaving the course.

Many students suffer self-doubt, exhaustion, and over-load at different times during their courses. These negative spells are often temporary and students may go through cycles of feeling depressed and unable to cope followed by more optimistic phases. Support from lecturers and other students can help them through a difficult patch and prevent withdrawal.

A tutor who teaches basic skills described the situation with two of her students,

'They were having problems at home, it was winter and they hit something they weren't good at, they might have dropped out, and I remember one girl who I actually put in the class, she said "I think you got me wrong, I think you thought I was better at this than I am." We went through it, she still wasn't going to get the grade, so I wasn't going to cure her problem - this was a little bit in GCSE Maths syllabus that she was going to have to get as good as she could at, but she was going to be great at other things, and then it was like she bounced back'. (Samantha, interview)

Lack of confidence may be misread by lecturers as lack of understanding, or lack of real interest. There may be particular issues here in relation to cross cultural communication and expected norms of behaviour. Lecturers may also unwittingly collude with their students lack of confidence. What has emerged from conversations with lecturers and students is the significance of interchanges which take place simultaneously at different levels. Sometimes the

lecturer may say something which is understood in a different way from that intended by the lecturer and sometimes there appears to be a subtext in a conversation which is understood by both parties. In this way, a comment intended by a lecturer to take the pressure off a student she believes is feeling anxious, may be interpreted by the student as the lecturer not thinking that he or she is capable of doing the work.

In order for students to develop confidence, they need to feel integrated into the learning community; they need to feel valued as individuals and receive regular feedback about their progress. This relies on institutional structures, college ethos, programming and support services and the classroom management and responses of individual staff.

Feeling part of the learning community is a powerful force in terms of student retention (Tinto, 1975; McGivney, 1996). My research has demonstrated that confidence gained through the interest and support of staff and fellow students, can enable women with many personal difficulties, to complete their courses and grow in the process.

‘All through the year we’ve really supported each other, which is really nice and you form a bond, you know. [...] I told people how awful my sociology essay was. You just get support and stuff and they turn it into something positive, whatever, and the same thing if I’m really upset or just tired, because they see you every day they detect when you’re feeling a bit low and they give you that support and vice versa, which is really nice. Yeah, it’s definitely important.’ (Cleo, interview)

‘Mature students talk about their problems quite a bit with each other. They discuss ideas about their work and stuff - because they discuss problems and things, in a way they give themselves strengths, so the group of students can be really good’ (Lizzie, interview)

As Smith (1979) has argued, external pressures are more likely to lead to a student withdrawing from a course if the course is not providing a positive experience. However, being a part-time student, especially one with outside commitments, means that there are limited opportunities to integrate into the social life of the institution. It is therefore important that lecturers ensure that developing a group identity, supporting study groups, ‘buddying’, social events are built into their courses (39). Yet, with the reduction of taught course hours and increased emphasis on outcomes, it may be that these aspects which should be central to a good learning experience, are being pushed to the margins.

Education is a life-changing experience; it is simultaneously exciting, daunting, full of possibilities and full of dangers. Enrolling in a course may radically change someone's life. Whilst students may look to education as a way of changing their lives, they may also feel an

anxiety that the change in status, the new career will separate them from their friends and family in an elitist way (Edwards, 1993). As Reay (1996) has argued, educational success is also a challenge to authenticity and working class identity. Thus, working-class students may feel very isolated in their attempts to manage personal change and meet all the different demands made on them.

Berry (1995), investigating experiences of women university students, found that between 64% and 77% indicated that they had suffered from stress. Her survey confirms earlier research and suggests a large amount of hidden distress, depression, stress and eating disorders among women students. Most of this distress appears to be rooted in personal and emotional difficulties, exacerbated by the other problems of student life. Although Berry's subjects may have been younger and were probably living away from home, my own research also indicates that there is a great deal of hidden stress amongst women students. Even experienced tutors sometimes express surprise when a student they believed to be managing well, suddenly displays behaviour which demonstrates that they have been suffering stress and depression for some time.

Although individual students will have their own sets of circumstances which affect their states of mind, there are also particular times of year when staff know attendance drops and students hit a 'flat spot'. These usually occur around November and February, when winter illnesses, dark evenings and bad weather combine with the uphill academic struggle - a long journey only just under way. Another key time is the summer, when examinations and anxiety about the future are issues. Some students certainly suffer from examination phobia and research links some late withdrawals from courses to this (McGivney, 1996). However, it may also be that the examination is not part of a student's personal learning goal.

Individualism, power and isolation in the classroom

Tinto (1975) and Kember (1995) have discussed the factors influencing a student's social and academic integration into an institution.

'Normative congruence is achieved when a student's intellectual beliefs and values are consistent with the expectations of the college and its faculty. In an academic context, incongruence is most often present when a student's conceptions of knowledge and student requirements differ from academic norms and conventions' (Kember, 1995:49-50)

If these observations are given a gender, class and race dynamic and considered in relation to the experiences of the women in my study, then the direction in which colleges are being pushed by government policy, is clearly at odds with what women want to learn, the times and places which are suitable for them to learn, the teaching and learning strategies they prefer and the support they need. This is therefore likely to lead to non-integration and perhaps withdrawal.

Whilst colleges may have encouraged participation from a wider group of students, comparatively little has been done to ensure that their experiences are positive (NIACE, 1994; McGivney, 1996), either in terms of practical action such as crèche and adult common rooms, but also in terms of programme content, delivery and especially the valuing of adult experience and concerns. Mature student experience is generally ignored (Edwards, 1993) and seldom integrated into the curricula and coursework (McGivney, 1996).

In the first chapter of this study I briefly outlined women's struggles to have access to education on their own terms. I argued that the development of 'Women's Education' has been important not only in its own right, but because it has influenced more widely the educational opportunities made available to women. Some current good practice can be found in single sex provision within FE colleges, usually for those who for cultural reasons prefer women-only classes (Coats, 1996). Discussion about the development and debates within Women's Education and Women's Studies is well documented elsewhere, (Coats, 1994; Graham, 1994; Mirza, 1995; Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998) and is not the focus of this research. My project here is to examine the extent to which recent developments in FE take account of women's lives and offer them real choices. In this context I have included the subjects women chose to study, the programming of courses, modes of delivery, resources, support for students and teaching and learning methods. Although this study concerns the general FE curriculum, I shall measure woman-centredness against some of the characteristics summarised by Coats (1994) which draws on research into women-only provision, comparing some key aspects of this with the data from the women in my study.

A curriculum which is sensitive to women and their preferred styles of learning is described as one which,

'uses subjective experience and affective processes, locates gendered experience in a wider social context, recognises the importance of group support and collective action, uses methods and strategies that encourage participation, continuously reviews, evaluates and develops, removes barriers and improves practicalities' (Coats, 1994:62-3).

Elliott (1998) has suggested that from a standpoint perspective and within the liberatory principles of Freire (1972), it is possible to 'develop a curriculum that emerges from the multiple experiences of women' (Elliott, 1998:54), which she asserts must go beyond curriculum content. She notes that the non award-bearing traditions of adult education offered possibilities for curriculum to be negotiated with students and communities, but that increasing emphasis on conforming to external pressures, including those of accrediting bodies, has reduced these opportunities. External demands now make the democratisation of the classroom and any shift of control over knowledge from teacher to students, far more difficult to achieve, especially within the general provision of FE where gender and cultural power dynamics are present.

There is a substantial body of research which has discussed ways in which the curriculum is part of the process by which gender identity is constructed and how this relates to the maintenance of the unequal position of men and women in both public and private spheres (including: Arnot, 1982; Wallace, 1987; Skeggs, 1988; Delamont, 1990; Lloyd and Duveen, 1992; Riddell, 1992; Sharpe, 1994; Abraham, 1995; Arnot, Gray, James and Rudduck, 1998).

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine this in depth and indeed is not its intention. However, it is important to recognise the existence of differential power within the classroom and the impact that this has on students' feelings about themselves and their ability to successfully complete courses, especially as some recent research on retention including Martinez (1997), fails to identify the control of knowledge as an issue.

Adult students have already learnt through their previous experiences of education, the ways in which gender codes impact on behaviour within classrooms (Riddell, 1992). The choices women make about what they study and the anxieties they feel about entering a classroom, have a relationship to their position of power relative to the lecturer and other students. Thus, a woman enrolling in a 'traditional male subject' such as motor vehicle maintenance, may not only feel disadvantaged by her lack of technical knowledge, but also that she will have to cope with a 'male culture' and possibly sexist behaviour. However, it is not only gender codes which are present, the classroom is a microcosm of the power relationships in the wider society. Students in the study often expressed fears about appearing 'different' from the other students. This was most often expressed in terms of their age and anxieties about being too old to learn (eleven times in seven interviews), which cut across social groupings. Many students

also expressed a fear that other people would be 'cleverer'. This was generally voiced by the working class women and supports previous research, including Bhavnani (1993), Luttrell (1993) and Reay (1996), which has revealed the tensions experienced by working class people in identifying themselves as both working class and 'intelligent'. As Reay has argued in relation to the experience of class, estimation of self-worth, degrees of confidence and feelings of entitlement, go beyond material resources and are underpinned by complex psychological processes.

Two of the black women in my study talked about racial prejudice. Floella told me,

'I think what I ask of young black people is that they really develop the power of staying and really arguing their case and discussing their case. If they have a point to make, if they think there's some sort of racism going on that they perhaps can influence, influence it and don't walk away, that's what I kind of try and discuss with young black people' (Floella, interview)

Floella is a mature black woman. She is clear that education has the potential to bring about personal change and social change. She is actively involved as a student in supporting other black women and challenging racism. This kind of solidarity is powerful and reveals the importance of developing the student group within college courses. For institutions with structures and practices which support the interests of dominant groups, in spite of equal opportunities rhetoric, the power of the group is also dangerous. Metcalf (1993) has similarly identified problems encountered by students from minority ethnic groups and students with disabilities resulting from individual prejudices and institutional structures. Differential power therefore affects whose voice is heard and whose experience valued. It controls the production of knowledge and the maintenance of inequalities.

The 'woman-centred' curriculum (Coats, 1994) as previously discussed, locates gendered experience in a wider social context and has a political purpose. Some evidence of learning which recognised and valued the distinctive attributes and experiences of women and located gender in a wider social context, emerged from my interactions with students. Women spoke positively of the opportunities to acknowledge the value of the domestic role (Morag, childcare) or analyse the mechanisms of oppression (Petra, Afro-Caribbean studies and Cleo, social studies) and valued the opportunity to examine women's experiences through texts or personal disclosure and discussion. The public presentation of work in the acting, dance and fine art courses which I saw, similarly allowed the women to identify the distinctive attributes of

women and make visible differences and continuities of female experience, through some very powerful and disturbing, self-devised statements. What emerges here is that there would appear to be very much greater scope to explore issues of gender within the expressive arts and humanities, than through the more narrowly focused vocational routes which, in the study, included business administration and hairdressing and other courses with a competence-based curriculum.

However, using subjective experience and acknowledging affective as well as cognitive processes is problematic. Even in women only groups there is differential power and the disclosure of personal information has consequences for the individual. Celebrating difference can be dangerous. Yet concentrating on areas of commonality also has its problems. Zukas (1998) has suggested that the 'unquestioning celebration' in classrooms of female nature and qualities

'does little to change women's relationships with men or indeed, their employment opportunities' (Zukas, 1998:32).

Unlike schools, students on an FE course may be from different generations. They may also have received their initial education in different countries. As a result, their cultures and previous experiences of education may affect their attitude to teaching and learning and the type of relationship they feel appropriate to have with staff and other students. For some students, being invited to share their life experiences in the class, is a positive experience which enables them to feel they have something valuable to contribute and share with the group. For others it is a threat, an invasion of privacy and a situation where their worst fears of exposing their inadequacies may come to the fore.

At times there has also been, for me, an element of bringing-up old insecurities, brought about by the whole new environment, situation and learning of new and academic subject matter. Thus, producing feelings of lack of confidence and wondering whether I can really do the work required. At times there were so many doubts around in my head; I'm such a slow reader; it takes time for things to sink in; I'm taking too many notes, I'm always doing homework; I can't manage my time properly - will I ever get it right (Access student, course work essay)

Badly handled, inviting students to contribute in class can re-kindle memories of former public humiliation and failure. Describing her reason for dropping out of a previous course one woman wrote,

'The teacher was awful and made me feel inadequate and foolish' (female, full time student, survey data)

The college counsellor works with groups as well as individual students. In one of her group sessions she was told,

'[...] that some students had left their courses, students I had never met, and I was told by some of their friends that the reasons that they had left the course was the tutors' styles. The tutors were not encouraging and supportive enough and instead critical and they couldn't cope (pause) on the other hand, I mean, I also know how many of our students stay because they feel so very supported and encouraged by tutors. It does seem to be a very important factor' (Marina, interview)

The students in my study were anxious about lecturers putting them 'on the spot' and exposing them as ignorant. They expressed tremendous relief that this was seldom the case and that there were opportunities where they could explain to lecturers in private, that they had not understood, or to ask for help.

Edwards (1993) has described the ways in which women students on social science courses in HE, made decisions about the extent to which they were prepared to share their feelings and life experiences in class, and the institutional and wider social structures which influenced their desire and ability to separate or connect the worlds of home and education. She found that childrearing, being homeless and/or a lone parent might be experiences some of the women were willing to feed into discussion, where appropriate and accepted. For many (hetero) sexual women, their relationships with men, however, were often regarded as the ultimate privacy. The women in my own study made similar responses.

'I'm quite happy to share (in class) intimate things - your own childhood and things like that. Some people say more than others. I mean there's been tears in class, put it that way. People talking about their own childhood - perhaps it wasn't good, you know' (Morag, interview)

The disclosure of personal data is an area, especially when the facilitator is white middle-class, where there are particular tensions around power relations. For example, Afshar (1994:136) has described the importance of privacy in family matters and loyalty to the husband, in relation to expectations of the behaviour of Muslim women. She says that Islam defines a woman as dependent on men thus, 'any transgression denotes a failure not only of the women, but also and particularly of their menfolk and hence the entire family' (Afshar, 1994:134). Disclosure of personal matters is therefore not only a breach of privacy, but has the potential to bring shame on the whole family. Allan (1990) and Finch (1983b) have argued that for some members of the working class, 'privacy' may also be linked with notions of 'respectability'.

For black students, privacy concerning their families may be an attempt to deny information which leads to pathologising the behaviour of black families (Phoenix, 1987).

Valuing individuals should not be confused with the privileging of competitive individualism, which has challenged collectivist approaches to education (Coats, 1994; McGivney, 1996) and has been described as 'a conscious rejection of feminine preferences' (Coats, 1994:4). The women in my study expressed feelings of stress, when they perceived there to be an element of competition developing between students. This tended to be associated with attainment levels in coursework. They saw it as threatening of relationships in the class and to the cohesion of the group, the support of which, I have already revealed as extremely important to them.

It has been said that a distinctive feature of much traditional adult education has been student centredness and co-operative group learning, (Russell, 1973; ACACE, 1979) although, Keddie (1980) has argued that there is little evidence to support the claim of distinctiveness and that an individualistic ideology functions to obscure inherent contradictions. Keddie has argued that it is dominant middle class values that are privileged and that these values attach particular social and political meaning to individualism, which do not reflect the educational and cultural models of the majority of students in traditional adult education. This argument can be equally be developed in terms of adult students in FE colleges. A number of the women in my study were attempting to acquire cultural capital for themselves and their children, but having to manage the stress of functioning in an alien world - 'coping' meant attempting to relate to the teaching and learning style and also epistemological issues about whose knowledge and culture is being passed on. Returning to college was an act of resistance in a male defined world; it was concerned with their identity, the wish to have their skills acknowledged, their culture and contribution valued. Unless colleges are able to recognise this in their practice, then women from socially disadvantaged groups will continue to leave courses. It is not just a matter of equal opportunities, it is a hard economic fact.

Unfortunately there would still appear to be an assumption in FE colleges, as Benn (1998) has identified, that offering the same curriculum to all students, will result in an equivalence of outcome and that men and women of different ages, classes and colour, receive teaching in the same set of circumstances

Time and flexibility - student needs and institutional responses

A characteristic of the women in my study, was that many of them had dipped in and out of education over a long period of time. Sometimes they completed courses and sometimes they left early but returned, not necessarily to the same course or college, to complete studies later. They were able to meet people, develop confidence as learners, try courses out and find out what career opportunities were available to them. This may not have been an efficient use of resources, but it certainly met the social and learning needs of these women and was an investment in the future for themselves and their families. Time allowed recreation to lead to re-creation. However, government funding is impatient and long learning trajectories do not fit easily with current funding systems and performance indicators. For example, whilst the structures exist to allow students to take two years to complete a one year course, colleges will only receive the funding for one year. Floella, had decided part way through her course that she would spread her studies over another year, in order to reduce the stress of studying and bringing up a child on her own. She wanted to enjoy the course and motherhood. This decision made perfect educational sense and met her personal needs, but this meant an increased cost to the college for the same income and the delay of claiming the achievement units until the next year. Should she be offered an un-conditional place in higher education and leave without completing the accreditation, this would mean a years teaching for no on course payment and no achievement funding.

For college managers, time is money: staff salaries, student hours, staff/student ratios, class contact hours, additional learning support, - money in and money out. Lecturers' student contact time has been increased under revised conditions of service and they are expected to work with larger groups of students. Student 'drop-out' means less money to pay for staff time and college services.

Time pressures have been consistently identified as an issue for adult students (including Woodley et al, 1987; Mansell and Parkin, 1990; Morrison, 1992). The linking of student withdrawal with their 'lack of time' to attend, has been considered by college managers and attached to a number of initiatives, but with little understanding of the way women's time is constrained. 'Time', for women students as revealed in this study, is linked to the practical issues of fitting classes around their caring commitments, but is also linked to patriarchal relations.

For many women giving time to people and time received, is linked to caring and being valued. For the majority of women in my study, being able to have time for themselves was important, finding other students and staff who were interested in them as people as well as students, made coming to college special. They were appreciative of the extra time, beyond the contractual course hours, that staff gave to them. It is not surprising therefore, that the reverse experience can be received as 'not caring'. Mansell and Parkin's (1990) study found that among the aspects that withdrawn part-time FE students had found unsatisfactory, was that they had not had enough time to discuss problems related to their study and found the college impersonal. Edward's (1993) study of women in Higher Education found that even those students who wanted to have 'personal barriers' between themselves and tutors, were shocked that for the academic staff it was just a job.

Their lecturers, they felt, should be enthusiastic and committed to sharing their knowledge with students. They should make time for their students, and not give them the impression that they would rather be doing something else (Edwards, 1993: 95)

The culture 'shock' of transferring from the supportive environment of an Access course, to a Higher Education institution, has been cited as a reason for withdrawal of these students from their degree courses (Moore, 1995). Similarly the stresses of embarking on an FE course can result in withdrawal.

To give students any extra time with staff, leaves college managers with the question of how this is going to be paid for. Flexible programming including modularisation and open learning have been advocated as a response to 'tailoring learning opportunities to fit around students' lifestyles (Carroll, 1991; Theodossin, 1994) (40). These ways of delivering the curriculum can also been seen as a response to minimal college childcare, lack of finance for mature students and pressure for outcomes on students. For example, roll-on, roll-off programmes are helpful to students because they can start at various points throughout the academic year and are helpful to colleges because they can enrol new students if some withdraw. More short courses allow students to have a 'taste' of FE; they also allow colleges to keep student numbers high throughout the year.

Modularisation, credit accumulation schemes, credit for previous learning (APL, APEL) open learning centres with self access materials, all appear to place the needs of the student central. However, as Caprizzi (1994) has suggested,

'These developments have resulted in the "decomposition" of courses: they have become collections of modules and credits. However, Access courses are required to have a "coherence" and have a "planned" programme of study and quality assessments at present still tend to focus upon the course/award rather than the individual. Traditional conceptions of a "cohort" of students following a "course" have been central to monitoring and remain part of the system of quality assurance' (Caprizzi, 1994:292)

The FEFC funding methodology and most college systems which have been set up to supply data to funders, cannot cope with 'flexibility' (41). Tracking student attendance through these systems is a nightmare. As a result a large proportion of students who leave because of personal or family sickness or pregnancy, or who transfer to other colleges because of residential moves, are logged as drop-outs. 'Intention to return' in FEFC terms, only refers to the discrete programme the student is enrolled on, not to a restart in a future academic year. Yet the evidence of my study is that the type of flexibility that women students want, is that which allows them to gain credit for 'learning episodes' undertaken in a variety of different adult learning environments, over what can sometimes be an extended period of time. As Whittaker (1994) so accurately puts it,

'Would colleges be better off not accepting students who are, or likely to be, pregnant, to get a job, become ill, go to another college, suffer domestic problems? There is an implicit conflict between the growth targets and the demands and realisation of ordinary people's lives, exacerbated by a narrow perception of outcomes which does not acknowledge the concept of interrupted learning so common among adult students. Essentially this flaw in the funding methodology works against part-time adult students, who are particularly likely to choose this mode to fit in with the other demands of their lives' (Whittaker, 1994:5)

An isolated and fragmented learning experience, on the other hand, is not what women want and this can be the negative side of 'flexible programming'. Modularisation can result in loss of group cohesion and the loss of the peer support identified as so important. For this reason, some tutors on Access courses have resisted modularisation (Caprizzi, 1994). If it does take place, support structures and group work needs to be maintained. McGivney (1996) has highlighted the tension which exists between

'the creation or maintenance of a co-operative group learning culture and the increasing emphasis on individual achievement and unitisation in post-compulsory education' (McGivney, 1996:137)

She emphasises the link between improving retention rates and group learning and group support networks.

Flexible Open Learning (FOL) workshops and the need for individualised academic student support, have been promoted as an answer to addressing the problems of student withdrawal resulting from discontinuity of study (FEU, 1987; Mansell and Parkin, 1990). Mansell and Parkin (1990) have linked improved retention to the provision of additional workshops where students could access materials to work at their own pace of learning. Many colleges have invested in large FOL centres, which provide a range of help including basic skills support, self-help teaching packages, revision and study skills materials. However, as previously mentioned, there are a number of issues embedded in these initiatives which require further consideration. The evidence from my research is that without the regular course time slot in their lives, many women would find it difficult to make time for 'themselves' to study. Well handled, the opportunity to share learning with other people can reduce feelings of isolation and provide a support network beyond the classroom. A woman student in my study admitted to having considered leaving and gave the reason for deciding to continue, as the power of her group,

'I got so far that it seemed a pity to give up now and also the other people with whom I started the course were still going and I didn't want to let them down' (female, part time student, survey)

'Not letting down the group or the lecturer' as they described it, was part of giving themselves permission to have personal time, it allowed them to control the feelings of guilt and 'selfishness' they often expressed in their conversations with me. I suggest that women students' tendency to prioritise other's needs above their own, has resulted in an assumption by staff, that there is a need for improved time management and to this end time management has been a regular feature of study skills modules. Whilst there is undoubtedly a need to help students who have been away from education to refresh their skills in writing discursive prose (FEU, 1987), use libraries effectively and develop note-taking and problem solving skills, (Munn et al, 1992), I have some concerns that the pressures that mature women students find themselves under are attributed to the poor management of their time, rather than unequal life opportunities. Bourner and Hamed (1987) and Bargh, Scott and Smith (1994) are amongst researchers who have concluded that mature students with complex lives are in fact skilled time managers. The study skill which Zandra, one of the women in my study, found most useful was assertiveness training, where she was able to consider her own needs as a learner and 'give herself permission' to say no to others' demands on her. This was a separate course, but Zandra's experience suggests that there is a need for colleges to take a more holistic approach

to learning and learner support, and an approach which allows women to identify the structures which threaten their ability to cope with study and offers them strategies to tackle them.

An holistic approach to learning and learner support

My research has confirmed my view that students would have a more positive experience of returning to education, and colleges would improve their retention rates, if there were a more holistic approach to the educational process. All aspects of students' lives influence and are influenced by their return to college and this should be recognised in programming and delivery. Cullen (1994) eloquently encourages providers to,

‘Acknowledge openly that many of their female students have to face the problem of finding affordable quality care for their children while they study. This does not necessarily mean providing such care: women are used to arranging childcare, to coping with finding alternative arrangements at the last minute. What it does mean is course providers changing their internalised image of what a student is like so that female adult students are made to feel acceptable as they are. The pressure of juggling the roles of student, partner, worker, would be lessened if the role of student was seen as including, not excluding, the others’ (Cullen, 1994:8)

An holistic approach values the whole individual, it does not mean that boundaries between public and private are breached and it allows students to choose where they separate or connect the different aspects of their lives (Edwards, 1993). The pressure of providing this kind of support has fallen officially and unofficially on lecturers who, in recent years, have had more student contact hours, larger classes, and increased bureaucracy attached to course management and the demands of external validating bodies and inspection (42). There are debates beyond the scope of this study relating to professionalism and the role of the female lecturer; however, research highlights the fact that for many part-time students (which the majority of mature students tend to be these days), it is their lecturer, who may also be part-time, to whom they look for advice and support (Munn et al, 1992; FEDA, 1995; McGivney, 1996). Lecturers may not feel qualified to discuss anything other than academic issues with their students (Munn et al, 1992; Moore, 1995) yet, the evidence of my research is that it becomes difficult to give academic support if the wider context of a student's life is not taken into consideration. (This does not preclude referral to other individuals and support agencies).

How should support be managed? Munn et al (1992) found that students had high satisfaction rates with courses in which educational guidance and support were integral to the design of the

course. Their findings supported my own, which is that mature students make little use of college wide provision, especially if it means making a special journey. They may also feel that there is a stigma attached to seeking additional help if it is seen as 'bolt-on provision for non-copers' (Deere, Gardener and Jude, 1997), rather than 'open door' support, to which they are entitled. However, Mansell and Parkin (1990) found that part-time students who felt they had limited access to teaching, resented time being taken up with learning support - we do not know whether these tended to be male or female students.

My research highlights the importance of pro-active lecturers, who take early action to help students who are under-achieving, missing sessions or showing signs of stress.

'I think sometimes, quite often even, students have been allowed onto courses that they really have not been able to cope with and that's been a very important factor in a number of people I've seen, and that they haven't really had the support within the college to help them through, study skills or whatever and even though in principle a lot of this support is supposed to be available. My experience of the students I've worked with is that it doesn't provide them with what they need and gosh, in some cases I really don't know how the students could go as far as they go on the courses without it being identified that they have needs which would mean that they would find it difficult to complete the course (Marina, interview)

Often adult students do not want to highlight that they are having problems and do not ask for help even if it is available, particularly if they think that it may support pathologizing discourses about working class or minority ethnic students. When students have been able to acknowledge the need for academic support, it appears that again it is the relationship with their lecturers that is a key factor.

'If they stick with their courses it usually means that they've had a very encouraging tutor and what has happened in two cases that I can think of, is that these students have finally been able to acknowledge what they needed, which is amazing, rather than going on covering it up.' (Marina, interview)

'Key tutors'

Relationships with staff was an important aspect of the college experience for the students in my study and this is supported by other research,

'All the evidence indicates that good staff-student interaction is one of the keys to good retention rates [...] many have found that it is often informal contact and rapport with a staff member - not necessarily a counsellor or a personal tutor or even someone with a formal pastoral role - that gives students the encouragement to continue studying. The key

attributes of such a person are friendliness, availability and interest in the student' (McGivney, 1996:133)

Smith and Bailey (1993) also agree that it is important for students to have sufficient good quality contact with staff, if they are to complete courses successfully and they link personal attention with good retention rates. Cullen (1994) found in her research that students wanted to be listened to and have their problems and anxieties acknowledged by lecturers, rather than minimised. Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) identified the importance to students of being treated as equals, with tutors being approachable and displaying genuine interest in them. The ideal Access tutor,

'[...] was interested in every student, treated the students as a mature equal with valuable life experience upon which further learning was built, and enabled the students to engage in self-directed learning' (Cullen, 1994:23,19624)

In my own study, the comments from students who were asked what their reasons were for continuing with a course, when they might have considered leaving, included:-

'encouragement from the college'

'very good advice and help from a lecturer'

'the tutor's support'

'the head of department gave me support and encouraged me to continue'

'I enjoy it and my teacher gives me confidence' (survey, see Appendix II)

In the case study college, students on full-time or substantial part-time courses are allocated tutors. The main role of the tutor is academic support but, what emerged from the research, was that they may adopt a much broader support role. In addition there are, as McGivney, (1996) has pointed out (43), lecturers and members of the college staff who play a key role in helping students to manage the personal challenges and change which result from returning to college.

These 'key tutors' have a depth of understanding about what it means to be a mature student, often based on personal experience; they are role models and mentors. They see beyond what is presented, they are pro-active and demonstrate real interest in their students,

'What I hear in the conversation is, it starts with maybe the children have been sick, or my life isn't going well or something. They'll never ever say 'I can't cope with the course' or that 'it's too much for me' and sometimes it can be one of those things, that either its too much or they just haven't got time, but usually you can tell from one 'phone call, or one

meeting whether they are going to come back or not. There's almost nothing you can do (pause) I think that you can usually pick up when there's a series of events that have occurred, that they're not coming back, but they're not going to tell you that.' (Samantha, Interview)

'Sometimes they get lost in the work. I've got one student who out of eight or ten sessions she should have attended, missed three and I dropped her a line and she came into the next session and said she hadn't been well, but actually I think she's worried about the course. I don't think that what she said was true' (Dawn, Interview)

As previously stated, students appreciate this and are aware of staff attitudes. They appreciate the extra time that many lecturers give them beyond the official class times and are increasingly aware of the demands that are made on staff, although there are clearly issues of differential power within the relationship and boundaries concerning privacy, which need to be respected.

Lizzie "Maria is always very busy. That's not saying anything bad, but she's always so stressed out. She's got so much that she hasn't got time to talk to her students a lot, so she doesn't know her students as well as she could. Sandra really knows her students well. She always seems to make time for them and she's sensitive when they've got problems, even when they don't say anything."

Amanda "Does this go beyond academic support?"

Lizzie "Oh yes, definitely. I think that's a big thing that people notice with Sandra"

It is important that students do feel that there is someone who will listen to them and that there are actions which can be taken to resolve problems. Moore (1995) and McGivney (1996) have both highlighted the number of students who leave courses without discussing the reasons for this with staff (44). Perhaps they do not believe that anyone is interested in them, or that anything can be done to help them, particularly if it is not an academic problem which is preventing them from studying. One student, in the case study college, was experiencing such stress that she was unable to open her mail at home, as a consequence she failed to pay her bills and was served with an eviction notice. It was at this point that she finally discussed her situation with college staff.

' She made it very clear she was going to leave that day, but then the minute it was spotted that there was a problem and she was told she could do something to sort it out, that's fine. Within a week she was back to her old self. The situation has been resolved and she's coming back to do other things next year. I think that she hoped that somebody would help, otherwise she just wouldn't have come in that day.' (Patricia, Interview)

Lecturers and student services staff agree that the students who are facing difficulties, and tell someone that they are going to have to leave the course, are really looking for help to continue. Sometimes it is practical help that is needed, but often it becomes a need for emotional support. Marina, a college counsellor who is also a lecturer and sees students who are under stress comments,

'I have had students who have come saying "I've got to leave the course I can't cope". Sometimes they do come with that. Often it's "don't know whether I'm going to be able to cope with this. Um, and I may have to leave". I think it's quite rarely "I've got to leave" because I think what tends to happen is that people leave and they don't even get as far as me. I think that's the problem and I think those who come for help are the ones who perhaps really do want to make it, even though they're at the end of their tether' (Marina, interview).

However, it is important that lecturers and students respect each other and develop a professional relationship which does not cause stress to either of them. A college guidance worker told me that she believes that most lecturers have clear boundaries concerning their own private lives and those of their students,

'There's too many people to look after in your class. They will do what they can if they find out that there's something wrong, and often there's so many times that a student lets you down, after all, then that's it. They follow the procedure.' (Patricia, interview)

Where tutors do become involved, there may be difficult ethical dilemmas. One particular student is a lone parent, her partner recently died of a drug overdose and her tutor arranged for financial assistance towards child care, but her attendance has continued to be erratic. Patricia says,

'I think her tutor thinks she's on drugs herself. So what do you do with that? Do they chase her up? What do you do? It's a classic example of how far do you go. We're not Social Services. Unless she actually came to us and said, "I think I'm not coping", then of course we can make a referral, but you can't just guess or jump to conclusions and start action purely on intuition, it's very difficult (pause) they'll only tell you what they want you to know' (Patricia, interview)

Many lecturers are part-time workers, some are parents and carers and may also be undertaking education or training themselves. They can empathise with their students' predicaments from their own life experience, not just as theory. A number of staff are committed to improving opportunities for women, they may also have been second chance learners. (Abimbola in my study is now a lecturer). However, the concern some lecturers show for their students can result in students placing unfair or unrealistic pressures on them. Several lecturers described situations where students who are late or miss sessions, expect a

private lesson at their own convenience, or telephone lecturers at home for help with assignments.

'I don't want to be disturbed at home, for example I don't want to be thinking about them all evening long, so I prefer to give up my lunch times if it means they get that support, than having this ongoing system of students 'phoning, leaving messages for me, demanding my attention' (Dawn, interview)

For women lecturers, this is an example of the way in which they too have been conditioned to be 'carers'. 'Flexibility' and 'student centredness' can be problematic if it is the individual lecturer, rather than the college systems, which deliver.

Patricia believes that the woman to woman aspect in the relationship is significant,

'I think a lot has to do with its mostly women teachers and women students and you know, you can understand some of the problems or you can say 'Oh God, yeah, I know what that's all about, and so its like an empathy (pause) but you don't let it take over what you're supposed to be doing' (Patricia, interview)

The market, retention and altered relationships

What emerges from discussion with lecturers is that whereas, in the past, they may have responded positively to the demands students made on their personal time, this is now less likely, unless the individual is suffering extreme distress. The extended college year and new conditions of service for lecturers, combined with what has been a continuous increase in paper work for staff over a number of years, may have meant that staff/student relationships have suffered. Even in colleges where there has not been industrial action, it may be that lecturers' feelings of being undervalued and exploited, are communicated subconsciously to their students. It could also be that formalising, or *professionalising* the concern many lecturers felt for their students has subtly altered the relationship, changing it from freely given personal time, to a pastoral role.

Lee (1991) has described the way in which 'a decade or more of "free-market" rhetoric' has led to some students regarding courses in terms of commercial exchange. There has been a move towards a more 'contractual' relationship between students and lecturers, reflecting the privileging of students as consumers. I have noted that as education becomes a commodity to buy or sell, customers impulse buy products (courses), use them for a while, tire of them and

discard them. The deeper significance of the educational contract is lost or disregarded.. Lecturers as 'service deliverers' and students as 'customers' is a very different relationship from tutor and student. Where is the power in these relationships? It may be that learning agreements and education contracts will usefully clarify the roles and responsibilities on either side. At the present time there appears to be a degree of stress and confusion all round.

The effect of charters and the rhetoric of customer rights, is evident in the number and nature of complaints made by students about college services and the concerns in the sector about the risks of litigation and legal fees (45). Letters of complaint refer to 'value for money', the quality of the product, misrepresentation in advertising (46). The language of the market place has, for some, replaced that of pedagogy and the construction of education markets may contribute to withdrawal from courses.

Whilst there has been increased concern about student withdrawal from courses, there is, I believe, inadequate recognition of the deeper structural reasons for non-completion and little recognition of women's motivation for returning to college and the patterns of their lives.

On investigation, many students who do not attend and are 'withdrawals' according to FEFC criteria, fully intend to return to education, if not the course, when other aspects of their lives allow. They should not be labelled 'drop-outs' and funding and accreditation frameworks should reflect the realities of women's' lives. (Frank and Houghton, 1997). Institutional funding criteria are still based on traditional course delivery and time-scales and are difficult to adapt to more flexible modes of delivery (McGivney, 1996).

Aspects of market ideology are threatening the relationship between lecturers and students and, in some instances, is repositioning women students as feckless and unable to cope with the demands of education.

'Students are basically lazy. They like the idea of the course but make excuses rather than efforts' (Field Notes, Jan. 1995).

There is still a tendency for staff to see 'drop out' as inevitable and many of the causes as beyond their control,

'Adult students have all sorts of pressures in their lives, its only to be expected that they attend intermittently and leave before the end of the course' (Field notes Dec. 1994 course tutors meeting with inspector).

Family responsibilities are often seen by educationalists to be 'interfering' with women students' ability to study. The problems which many women experience in combining family and education, are conceptualised in ways which place the onus for dealing with them on the women themselves (Edwards, 1993).

A number of current retention initiatives focus more on minimising the negative effects of non-completion for the institution, rather than on the deeper issues. In the absence of a truly student centred and flexible curriculum which provides holistic support for learning, women students and some lecturers seek to find spaces in which to work.

'Our team is very much about supporting the individual and it's something we hold onto very strongly because we recognise it as a philosophy of adult education. We've got women coming into child care because they think it's an easy option, but you need to recognise that there is a huge amount of learning and empowering and excitement there and people need help and support to help them move forward for themselves.' (Dawn, interview)

There is a need to find a balance between the group experience and individualised learning in order to develop confident and skilled, independent learners.

For mature women, returning to education can be a space away from their children, an opportunity to learn a new skill or develop an old one, the start of a new career. They want the quality of their lives to be improved as a result of their engagement with the education process. Many achieve their goals, but perhaps there are some women who expect too much of themselves, their lecturers and education. A counselling lecturer told me,

'Quite a few people are drawn to counselling courses to enable them to heal themselves' (Marina, interview)

and the educational guidance worker states,

'[...] if we're particularly talking about making a career in counselling, it is usually because they've gone through something themselves, or they want to make sense of what's happening to them and by the same token, the majority of our mature students who choose psychology from the Access course are students who well, it's as if, you know, psychology is going to answer all their questions [...] and social work [...] Even when I was working in the independent advice services, it's been people saying "I've had a very positive experience, or positive response and they think they have to do it' (Patricia, interview)

Whilst I have argued that education should empower women, it may be that the combination of the long history of unequal opportunities for women and current educational policies and structures, limit what can be achieved. The individual and tutor may feel disappointed when a student leaves, especially if a great deal of support has been given, but sometimes it may be as a college counsellor suggests, students are

‘looking for something in courses that can not be found’ (Marina, interview)

RESULTS

In this section I shall consider the tensions which colleges have to manage in attempting to achieve government defined success in terms of student achievement, whilst seeking to enable students to attain their own, different learning goals.

I shall argue that the ‘results’ of students’ involvement in the education process are being re-defined as narrow vocational outcomes; with qualifications and progression to employment, or higher levels of study, as the criteria for success. I shall assert that whilst the women in my study wanted qualifications and skills that would help them achieve well paid jobs, they had much broader definitions of ‘success’ which related to the benefits their own education could bring to themselves, their children where they had any and the wider society in the long term. I shall describe how attempts to pursue these personal goals provide problems for colleges and the ways in which government policy, interpreted by colleges, affects the choices that students make.

I shall suggest that despite discussions about ‘value added’ (the new skills and knowledge which students gain relative to their starting point at the beginning of a course), the focus on results, defined as qualifications and published as ‘league tables’, privileges a competitive white male approach to learning and that as a result, some groups in society are marginalised.

I shall also argue that the way in which the increase in the number of people gaining qualifications has been attached to a discourse of falling standards, is intended to raise public

doubt in the effectiveness of teachers and may have a discriminatory effect on disadvantaged groups.

How the link between accreditation and funding has shaped the curriculum and affected the choices available to students.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act made a distinction between vocational and non-vocational adult education. Vocational education as defined in 'Schedule 2' of the Act was to be funded by the Government via the FEFC., whilst the non-vocational strand described by the 1991 white paper as 'courses for the leisure interests of adults' (HMSO, 1991), was to be funded by Local Authorities.

In order to meet growth targets, FE colleges have been increasing the number and range of courses designed to appeal to the adult market. They have also been seeking to optimise FEFC funding which has meant that the majority of courses have accreditation. At the same time, Local Authority adult education has suffered a drastic reduction. The result has been fewer non accredited courses of the type which the majority of the women in my study chose as their first step back to education. The continuing need for 'taster' courses and the proliferation of FE courses (for which students with concessionary status pay no tuition fee) has attracted adult students who are not necessarily committed to sit an examination, or produce coursework portfolios, although their intentions may change over time. This has particularly been the case with courses in languages and the arts (47). Despite the best efforts of the government, adult students have been finding ways of using publicly funded education to meet their personal learning goals - as NIACE asserted during the debate on the white paper,

'Every major study confirms that student purpose cannot be predicted by the title or ostensible purpose of the course' (Adults Learning, 1991 vol. 2:270)

However the government is still keeping the pressure up to ensure that funding is limited to its own vocational specifications. Government action clearly signals a wish to control the proliferation of vocational qualifications and combat variable standards. A TES interview with Dr. Nick Tate, chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority reported that,

'inadequate and duplicate qualifications will be hunted down and replaced with awards 'hallmarked' as nationally accepted standards' (TES, 6.6.97:31).

Initially 'schedule 2' courses included those which led to 'college certificates' as well as courses accredited by external validating bodies. The FEFC funding system has progressively moved from recognition of internal certificates and the funding of courses according to taught hours allocated by colleges, to recognition of individually-listed qualifications acceptable to the FEFC, with a designated tariff. The FEFC estimated a shift of 20%, from 65% in 1996-97 to 85% in 1997-98, in the number of enrolments on qualification courses (FEFCb). The FEFC document, *How to Apply for Funding 1997-98*, clearly states that the funding rules are intended to stop courses which are perceived to be recreational rather than vocational, being paid for by government funds (FEFCb:34). Not only is college funding linked to individual student achievement of credits, but the funding of some courses in schedule 2 is dependent on the majority of students routinely achieving qualifications and progressing to the next level. Failure to achieve qualification targets, in relation to national averages, is criticised in inspection reports and presents a poor performance profile to the outside world. This is potentially damaging to the reputation of the college, which is so important when competing within the local education market. A possible outcome therefore, of students failing to complete courses, or gain qualifications, is that these courses will not exist in future (48). Or if they do, more rigorous pre-entry screening may be introduced in an attempt to reduce the number of students who fail to achieve qualifications in the prescribed time. As previously discussed, this will discriminate against less confident groups, especially women returners. This narrow approach to achievement also fails to take into account the way that people change as a result of their involvement with education, and that to change from one course to another is a perfectly reasonable outcome. For a significant number of women in my study 'recreation' had become, over time 're-creation'.

Women and accreditation

Modern society has become obsessed with 'credentialism' and in a world where opportunities are not equal, qualifications offer a degree of 'transparency' in relation to progression to higher education and employment. They also raise personal status, which was an important issue for the women in my study. However, the FE curriculum areas in which women gain their vocational qualifications still tend to be traditional 'female' subjects, linked to their roles as carers within the family and the wider society:- childcare, social work, nursing, office work and catering and these subjects still have low status (49). The financial rewards for students are

also often lower in these vocational areas than in the traditional male occupations, for example in modern apprenticeships there is a significant financial differential between engineering and childcare (engineering £88 per week on average and childcare £41 per week, source - Rees, 1997).

The move towards course accreditation reduces the amount of control students have over their own learning, with less room for a negotiated curriculum and often more pressure to get through the syllabus within fewer taught hours. The move towards formal assessment and accreditation can pose problems in terms of the co-operative way in which women prefer to learn (Spender, 1980 and Coats, 1994). Berry (1995) writing about stress and depression experienced by women students in university, suggests that the sexist culture of universities contributes to levels of distress. In particular she cites the individualistic culture of personal achievement which runs counter to a collegiate, co-operative, women-friendly, approach to teaching and learning. Educational models are worked around a male view which promotes hierarchies and competition and places more value in formally acquired knowledge than personal experience (Fraser, 1995). The co-operative way women prefer to learn and the value they place in knowledge acquired through living, is often problematic in terms of syllabuses set by examination boards and in modes of assessment. The shared experience of the group, central to the philosophy of adult education and Women's Studies courses runs against the role of teacher as 'expert'; this method of learning can therefore be devalued within a male-defined education system. De Wolfe (1980) has argued that formal assessment is linked to an ethos of competitive individualism, and that grading can introduce competition and envy and is destructive to group work because it highlights failure, rather than confirms learning. I have already described the way in which some of the women in my study found that assessment generated feelings of distress and inadequacy. Law (1998) has argued that accreditation can be a way of 'normalising' women and disciplining lecturers,

'In marketplace economics, standardisation is what pays dividends, the mainstreaming of provision through the control of assessment is one way to standardise need, even to dictate it. Diversity as a concept cannot be matched to this model' (Law, 1998:62).

Law is concerned how far standardisation will allow for minority needs to be acknowledged and met. She believes that the intervention of assessment alters classroom practice and may lead to student stress and drop out, particularly in the case of students with little academic success in their past history.

However, I suggest that regular, honest and supportive feedback, identified as important in student retention (McGivney, 1996; Martinez, 1997), has been strengthened by the recent focus on quality systems, inspection and the internal verification demands of accrediting bodies.

Learning geared towards demonstrating individual achievement runs contrary to the collaborative learning style that many women prefer. The need for lecturers to cover a set syllabus within a limited time-frame (which has shrunk to optimise funding and reduce unit costs), makes it more difficult for lecturers to develop group relationships, draw out students' previous experience and knowledge and negotiate the curriculum with them. The push for accreditation of the curriculum has brought about significant changes in the content and style of learning, yet there has been very little research to consider the long-term effects.

Accreditation and raising standards

Not only are colleges being required to increase participation, but they are also expected to raise, or at least maintain educational standards. There is a fear that colleges' need for student achievement to trigger funding units, may make the educational experience less rigorous. There is particular unease about college certificates, non-traditional forms of assessment and internal moderation. This is evident in the way that the FEFC recognition of courses eligible for funding has changed over the years, with a demand for colleges to move to externally validated courses with agreed assessment procedures and quality mechanisms. There is also concern that the quest for equality, supported by so-called left wing lecturers, has resulted in an erosion of standards. Jones (1989) has suggested that the link between equal opportunities and poor standards has been the most powerful theme of right-wing educational discourse. In order to raise standards, educational policy has forced the introduction of staff appraisal, quality assurance systems and performance indicators; the phasing out of college certificates and the establishment of external inspection.

Government has intervened to rationalise the 'jungle of qualifications' (Hall, 1987) which had separately developed over time, were differently structured and did not interlock in any clear way. This has resulted in the development of the competence based National Vocational Qualification framework. Here can be seen the attempt to insert the needs of business and

industry, via the NCVQ employer Lead Bodies/Occupational Standards Councils, into the heart of the curriculum.

It is instructive to look briefly at some of the discussion in the press concerning educational standards, in order to gain a flavour of how public and high profile this matter has been. Improvements in examination results, particularly GCSE and A level, has led to much debate about the maintenance of academic standards and suggestions that the examinations have become easier rather than that standards of achievement have risen (The Independent, 14.8.97:6,13 and 13.8.97:1; THES 15.8.97:3; Guardian 14.8.97:9,13 and 13.8.97:1; Economist 16.8.97:26; TES 15.8.97:1,4; Times 14.8.97:1,9 and 15.8.97:31; Financial Times 14.8.97:8). Examination Boards have been accused of placing too much emphasis on capturing a larger share of the market and too little on maintaining standards. The Guardian, (14.8.1996:3) reports, 'Ministers are considering a manifesto pledge to change the examination board system' one option being to amalgamate the four English boards to dispel fears of schools and colleges choosing boards they believe are most likely to give the highest results. Investigations by Ofsted and the School Curriculum Assessment Authority (SCAA) into GCSE and A level standards has resulted in claims by the advisers that the examinations are easier than they were twenty years ago and that students are given too much assistance in order to ensure pass rates (Guardian, 29.7.1996:6). Modular A levels have been cited as the specific cause of the dilution in A level standards (Financial Times, 15.8.1996:9) (50). Given the emphasis that the government has placed on league tables, it would not be surprising if colleges opted for examination boards and modes of assessment which they believe would produce the most positive results. However, fitting the mode of assessment with the preferred learning style of students does not threaten standards.

Conclusion

Thus, FE Colleges have to work with a number of tensions, the central one of which is to simultaneously meet the demands of the government for a high volume of skilled workers and the needs of students for personalised learning opportunities.

Colleges have been asked to be more efficient, yet they also need to widen participation, although research has shown that students need extra support and time to achieve positive outcomes. Staff have had to balance the 'business' need to fill courses with the moral

imperative to select students who have the potential to be successful. In interview, staff need to be realistic about what study will involve and identify areas where additional support may be needed, yet without eroding the fragile confidence of those who are not secure in their own abilities.

Colleges are required to improve retention and achievement and to use less resources to work with more people with few formal qualifications and at the same time to improve academic achievement year on year. Ways of measuring college performance have become more refined and the scope for 'local interpretation' reduced. Consequently colleges have moved towards financially rewarding areas which are vocational programmes. Such courses are typically delivered in large groups, using fast track approaches and focus on individual achievement. This style of course delivery does not lend itself to student centred learning which values personal experience and collaborative learning. There has been an increase in modular programmes, ostensibly to provide a more flexible curriculum for students but also as a strategy to improve retention rates.

Managers thus have to manage complexity and paradox, in a climate of continuous change and respond to new government initiatives, in order to ensure the future of their colleges. Individual staff, find managing these tensions stressful and this impacts on their interactions with students. Some of the women students I interviewed noted that staff were under pressure and were mostly sympathetically, but they were also aware that this sometimes adversely affected the quality of relationship that developed between them.

Women students respond to the services offered by colleges at a number of different levels and according to their experiences and values. A number of interviews and essays showed the women were quick to accept any problems with returning to study, as their own personal inadequacies. This was irrespective of class, ethnicity, age or other grouping. However if the problems with fitting together college and the other parts of their lives result in them not completing the course, then not all social groups are treated equally. For a professional working woman, leaving a course may be described as 'too busy'; for a lone working-class mother or a black woman, it is likely to re-inforce impressions of fecklessness and the pathologizing of her community. In addition, essentialist stereotypes which place women as 'emotional', are likely to be linked with any problems they encounter when attempting to manage the pressure of study alongside the other demands in their lives. The majority of

women in my study were, however, able to separate their own skills from their current circumstances, which were beyond their power to control. Again, this response was not confined to any particular social grouping. What did emerge as significant was that none of these women took a deterministic view of their situations. They believed that their circumstances would change over time and thus allow them to progress in the future. Samantha (white lecturer) and Cleo (black student) also referred to other women who had not become students, or who had left early, in terms of it not yet being 'their time', suggesting that these women would at some future time arrive at a point when their psychological and material circumstances would allow them to make a life-change.

The women were more likely to be 'grateful' for the resources they did receive, such as Trish's crèche place, rather than critical that facilities which support women's return to education should be a right. Similarly Trish and Geraldine commented on the difficulty of fitting in with course times, but saw this as their problem more than that of the college. These responses reveal an individualised response and indicate the ways in which women operate within discourses concerning their social roles, as I have previously discussed. This study has demonstrated that the way educational opportunities are structured, does not privilege the needs of mothers outside the home and beyond their primary 'duty' of caring for their children.

Students were very aware of the pressure that colleges and most especially staff, are subject to. In part, this is the result of discussion in the media, but mostly resulted from their own experiences. Despite the glossy prospectuses, it is only too obvious that there is often a lack of up-to date equipment or resources,

'the most frustrating aspect for me is when the library does not stock the book required or they only have one copy and it's out on loan. Unfortunately this is a problem that is not going to go away for students, particularly with the government reduction in education funding' (Access student essay).

So while the government line is that more funds are available and that colleges need to be more efficient in order to improve standards, students do not necessarily blame college management for the lack of resources. Lecturers certainly find the situation they are asked to work with embarrassing, and do their best to distance themselves from it, pointing to external factors. For students who believed that a new Labour government would better respond to the needs of ordinary, working-class people, there has also been disappointment, as the words of a fifty year old, white, working-class woman who left school without formal qualifications reveal,

‘the government has made a mistake in making the age-limit for student loans too low. I do feel very disappointed and betrayed that a political party which I have supported through the many years that it was out of power, should have backtracked on its traditional ethos to the detriment of so many of its loyal supporters’ (Access student essay)

For all the women I interviewed, returning to college was positive (although not without problems). They believed their choice of course was their own, sometimes long held, desire. None of them saw the course, or their future careers as gendered, even though two of them were studying sociology and arguably had the intellectual tools to identify how inequalities are maintained. For them all, education was about choice, independence and empowerment. Their awareness of social structures, oppression and inequalities generally related to their lives outside college and to their ‘former selves’, although two of the black women talked about racism in the college and in society more generally. So while the women supported the principle of equal opportunities, their choice of subject and the reasons behind the choice could be linked to a gendered identity, particularly to motherhood (twelve women). Some of the women were therefore simultaneously knowledgeable about the way inequalities are structured and blind to their own positions.

I would argue that FE’s inability to be responsive to the social and material realities which structure women’s lives, has resulted in women using all learning opportunities available to them according to their need and circumstances. They have, with difficulty, created their own ‘flexible’ provision, selecting from LEA, FE and the voluntary sector. The consequences for colleges where this has resulted in non-completion of courses and non-attainment of qualifications, has been serious.

The current performance indicators used to measure outcomes against investment in education, marginalises less tangible learner outcomes such as increased confidence, more involvement in public life - in particular time invested in supporting children’s education. The women in my study had often spent many years using education as a way to build their skills and confidence. They were succeeding in gaining qualifications and employment and were ensuring the success of their own children who, in turn, would contribute to the economy. More than this, they were making a contribution to their communities. The government’s need to demonstrate the relationship between education spending and economic regeneration should take a longer view of ‘outcomes’ and consider cultural as well as economic regeneration. We should welcome the fact that more qualifications are being gained by a broader section of the community than

before, however, it is still of concern that some groups are under-represented, that the choice of subjects shows gender bias and that what counts as a 'qualification' is so narrowly defined.

NOTES

1. Examples of published documents include:- Local Publication of Information about Student Achievement (known as PISA), published annually by the DfEE, also Measuring Achievement: FE College Performance Indicators 1994 - 95 (FEFC, 1997a) which includes 'achievement of funding target, student number trends - an indication of college responsiveness, student continuation - an indicator of programme effectiveness, achievement of qualifications - an indication of student achievement, attainment of NVQ or equivalent - an indicator of contribution to national targets, average level of funding - an indicator of value for money' (FEFC, 1997a: iv)
2. Achievements of Colleges on their Charter Commitments, (FEFC, 1996a). A national survey report from the Further Education Funding Council.
3. Indicated by the programme of conferences, training events, research projects and publications on these subjects provided by a number of organisations e.g. Hayes (1996) *Strategies for improving student retention on award bearing courses*, McGivney (1996) *Staying or Leaving the Course*, Martinez (1997) *Improving Student Retention: a guide to successful strategies*, Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998)) *Staff Development for Student Retention: in further and adult education*. See also 'Too Good for the Shelf' FEDA publications 1997 and NIACE publications and conference lists.
4. Supported by the findings in Learning Works. (Kennedy, 1997)
5. The Independent reported that research by the Labour Research Department found that two out of three FE colleges 'are in financial crisis, reporting a deficit of £90 million. (Independent, 1.8.97 pg. 6)
6. The Independent noted that analysis of 347 colleges in England showed 'more than 1,000 teaching jobs axed' (Independent, 1.8.97 pg. 6).
7. FEFC circular 97/20 *Report for the Quality Assessment Committee for 1995 - 96 commends* 'the expansion which colleges were achieving through franchising, short-course provision for industry and commerce, closer collaboration with training and enterprise councils (TECs) and productive links with institutions and customers overseas' (FEFC, 1997c) but notes that development will require sources of funding and will be a concern for senior managers.
8. source - FEFC report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office, Feb. 1997.
9. 'How to Apply for Funding, 1987 - 98' (FEFC, 1996b) example of an annually produced document which details the funding methodology and indicates changes from the previous year.
10. It was intended that the historical aspect would be phased out with colleges with low ALFs converging with those with high ALFs. To date this convergence has been slow and only partial.
11. The Kennedy report (Kennedy, 1997) states, 'responses to our call for evidence and *Pathways to Success* show widespread agreement that changes in the governments' funding of further education are essential for widening participation' (Kennedy, 1997:43). In chapter 5 the report calls for changes in the FEFC funding system and chapter 6 considers new systems of financial support for students.

12. Two lecturers at Chippenham College, sacked for refusing to sign new 'flexible' contracts lost their claim for unfair dismissal at an industrial tribunal. Although the three member panel expressed sympathy for the lecturers it ruled that on balance the college had acted reasonably and for business reasons.
13. An indicator of the interest college managers have in making savings is the attendance at 'roadshows' arranged in 1997/98 by RM Nimbus computers promising 'save money and deliver real efficiency gains' (FE Now issue 40 pg. 14), 'The College Without Students, Staff, Lecturers' (FE Now issue 34 pg. 16) and by the Education Learning Services (ELS) promoting the cost effectiveness of employing their agency staff.
14. Discussion at NIACE Women's Day Conference, Birmingham 6th March, 1997.
15. Performance indicators devised by the FEFC in consultation with colleges are intended to be 'clearly defined so that a reliable comparison between institutions is possible' (FEFC, 1997a:7). The section within the FEFC which monitors efficient use of accommodation is known by colleges as 'the space police', an indicator of the way it is regarded by practitioners.
16. 'Older and Bolder' research findings discussed with Jim Soulsby, NIACE.
17. The Investors in People initiative was introduced in an effort to encourage employers to invest in training for their employees. However there is some evidence (CBI, 1994) that the growing number of part time and temporary workers, a substantial number of whom are women, are largely excluded from employer provided training.
18. The implementation of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act has resulted in a growth of accredited courses at the expense of un-certificated ones. Also reductions in local government funding have hit LEA adult education provision hard as local government has prioritised school budgets, partly to minimise the financial attractions to governors of opting out of LEA control. (Uden, 1996:52)
19. In 1996/97 55.1% of all FE students were female (FEFC, 1998)
20. Adult Learners in FE Colleges, NIACE and FEU conference, Birmingham, 27th June, 1994.
21. Concern was raised at the threat to services which particularly supported women students by practitioners (NIACE Women's Day Conference, Birmingham, 6th March, 1997).
22. The indications from the FEFC in February 1998 (some time after this section was written) is that the Kennedy agenda will be delivered through funding targeted on post code areas with high levels of social deprivation.
23. Ministers suggested that colleges would have to finance extra students from their current allocations, Financial Times 28.1.97 pg. 12.
24. I expressed my concerns about how this data might be used to Paul when he sent me a draft for comment. My particular concern relates to the identification of some minority ethnic groups as being more likely to withdraw from a course e.g. full time female students aged over 19 from Pakistani communities. This data could either be used to stimulate colleges to find ways to better meet the needs of such groups, or to make admissions staff less likely to accept them on courses. I had also heard some colleges boast that they could predict outcome to a high degree of accuracy based on their student selection profile (NIACE conference, March 1997).
25. It is recognised amongst adult educators, especially in the literacy field, that adult students can develop strategies to cover up deficiencies in basic skills. (ref. Manchester Literacy Project)

26. Evidenced by questions raised at numerous conferences e.g. Guidance and Recruitment, NIACE, 15th November 1995; Retention and Completion Rates, NIACE, 13th December, 1995; Learner Support, NIACE, 13th March, 1996; Support Strategies to Improve Student Retention, FEDA, 18th March, 1997; Improving Retention of Part-time Adult Students, FEDA, 5th February, 1998.
27. The FEFC supplement for childcare has only been a 'contribution' to the costs of providing services. Early suggestions on the implementation of the Kennedy report are that childcare funding will be 'built in' rather than 'add on' to the methodology and targeted on specific groups
28. The priority has been for both Conservative and Labour governments to get people off state benefits and into employment rather than into education. 'Lone parents need jobs, not training' Andrew Mitchell MP, Conservative minister at DSS with responsibility for the Child Support Agency and lone parent issues (Times, 22.6.96) and 'No cash reprieve for lone parents' Guardian, 2 12 1997 - a discussion of Labour Government social policy.
29. Analysis of findings in published FEFC inspection reports.
30. Klondike of the future was an expression used by Sir William Stubbs, Chief Executive of the FEFC 1992 - 1996, at an FEFC conference for Principals)
31. Lecturers in the case study college told me that an increasing number of their students were being offered unconditional places in HE. Students accepted on the strength of their portfolios or auditions were deciding that earning money was more of a priority for them than gaining another unit or taking an exam. An example of the knock on effect of HE institutions needing to reach their own recruitment targets and the reduction in student grants.
32. Most notably conferences and research by Veronica McGivney at NIACE and Paul Martinez at FEDA, both of whom have drawn on my research for this thesis in their publications. I have also presented findings on issues related to student retention at eight national and regional conferences and have had two papers published in journals.
33. Although these college bursaries are likely to be very small sums of money they could make the difference to some students' ability to complete a course. A report by Wirral Metropolitan College (1993) on financial barriers found that even small amounts of money required for books, equipment, travel could lead to withdrawal of unemployed students on very low incomes
34. The regulation which caused students the greatest difficulties was the 'actively seeking work' rule which required students who did not have children of school age and who were claiming benefits to show evidence that they were not only available for work but were actively seeking work. This often required attendance at job seekers workshops at times which clashed with course times, writing applications and attending interviews. It could be a particular problem for a student who was trying to make a career change but had marketable skills such as computing or word processing.
35. Although the students in Berry's study are probably living away from home, I would suggest that the effects of poverty are the same.
36. The new Labour government has made a commitment to reduce welfare costs by reforming the benefits system. One initiative is a 'new deal' for lone parents which will mean a reduced benefit for new claimants. The Social Security Secretary, Harriet Harman, stated 'We have always said that our approach to lone mothers would be to help them to work so that they could be better off than they could ever be on benefit' (Guardian, 2.12.97)
37. The Learning Age (DfEE, 1998) clearly identifies the Labour Government's wish that individuals and business should invest an increasing amount in lifelong learning and that any increase in resources will be targeted to particular groups via initiatives such as University for Industry and New Deal.

38. Accreditation of Prior Learning is an educational process which recognises learning experience gained by individuals during their life time, for the purposes of credit, exemption or recognition of individual achievements and aims to provide flexible access to assessment and accreditation for adults.
39. City and Islington College has developed a mentoring scheme for black students in response to the poor completion rates of students from minority ethnic groups. The supplementary curriculum led mainly by black mentors focuses on academic skills, cultural awareness and social activities. In 94/5 96% of students on the mentor programme completed their courses. Detailed in Martinez (1997).
40. Examples of colleges responses to making the curriculum more flexible include:- Lewisham and Woolwich Colleges have unitised a number of curriculum areas; Wulfrum College with Bilston Community College and Wolverhampton TEC operate an Open Learning Centre which caters for approximately 800 students. Detailed in Martinez (1997).
41. The difficulty of providing reliable student data has been commented on in numerous inspection reports and was described as problematic in many colleges by the FEFC Quality Assessment Committee (FEFC, 1997c). Martinez (1997) research with thirty colleges concluded that the difficulties appear at two levels. First, 'Nationally, the rate of change demanded by funding and inspection authorities and the introduction (and revision) of complex, unitised qualifications, have outstripped the ability of many colleges to cope. Second, National level problems are exacerbated within colleges by the costs of administration, management and technology. Martinez, 1997:124).
42. FEFC Assessment Committee acknowledges the increased demands made of lecturers in recent years. It also identifies 'poor tutorial practice in a significant number of colleges' (FEFC, 1997c:9)
43. During 1995 Veronica McGivney and I worked together and shared some emerging issues from our research into student retention. The special support that some staff gave students was one of the particular points we discussed.
44. Moore (1995) found that of students who had withdrawn from courses at Sheffield Hallam University, 21% had left without discussing their situation with anyone from the institution.
45. Regular advice and case studies are circulated to colleges from the legal department at the AOC. Conferences such as 'Complaints Management in FE' 1st Dec. 1998, CAPITA have been organised to debate the issues.
46. This has been my personal experience as the senior college manager in and FE college with the responsibility for monitoring complaints over the last five years.
47. Some courses such as engineering or basic education are likely to only appear in FEFC programmes and cultural and community studies only in Local Authority funded programmes. However, languages and the arts may appear in both programmes but with a lower fee for the FE course. It is understandable that someone who wants to learn a language or make jewellery for personal interest will enrol on the cheaper certificated course but have minimal interest in the award. The government fear is that 'leisure' is being funded by the public purse.
48. The funding of achievement units is low in comparison with on course funding therefore for some courses such as ESOL, where there may not be suitable accreditation, colleges have chosen to forfeit achievement funding, but are unlikely to lose on course funding.

49. The Independent 23.5.97:10 and the Financial Times 23.5.97:10 reporting on research carried out by the Equal Opportunities Commission stated that girls out-perform boys at GCSE and A-level but still study 'traditional female' subject areas. The F.T added that this pattern continues in vocational training with women 'in caring occupations leaving men to do drafts, manufacturing and construction'
50. A level standards - The Independent (5.8.96 pg. 1) reported 'the A level pass rate will rise again this year because of changes that allow students to spread revision throughout their courses rather than having to do it all at the end, examination boards predict'. 'The new 'modular' A-levels, which were taken by up to 51,000 students this year, have raised motivation and have allowed students to drop out early if they are unlikely to pass, the boards say. Under this system, candidates who fail can retake as many times as they like' - The Conservative Government announced that it would accept Sir Ron Dearing's recommendation to limit re-sits for each module, to ensure that modular courses were not seen to be 'softer' than the traditional mode (source TES 9.8.96 pg. 2). The examination boards naturally condemned the Government's reaction as ridiculously premature. (source Guardian 6.8.96 pg. 4)

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In this final chapter I will summarise my research, drawing together the themes that have been identified as running through the women's accounts of their experiences of returning to education. In particular, I will draw conclusions about the extent to which recent education policy and provision has improved educational opportunities and life-choice for women, highlighting tensions and contradictions in order to suggest how far students can manipulate the situation to suit their own purposes. My discussion will consider the persistence of specific discourses which relate to women's role in society. I will then discuss the contribution that women are making to the development of a learning culture and the potential this has to support the government vision of Lifelong Learning. In my conclusion to this study, I will identify new and significant issues arising from the research, which I believe policy makers and managers should take into account in their strategic and operational planning. Finally, I will suggest some areas which I believe are important for further research.

This study commenced at about the time that Lifetime Learning, (DfEE, 1995) was being formally adopted by the Conservative Government, as their vision of education and training for the adult population. Politicians hoped that the implementation of new education policies within the re-organised Further Education sector, would result in an increase in the number of people with vocational skills, which would benefit the economy. These skills would be continuously reinforced by further learning throughout people's adult lives and would contribute to a 'learning culture' which would enrich the life of the community.

As this study concludes a new Labour government has published its own consultation document on 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998) (1). The document has much in common with its predecessor, indicating a broad consensus on the value of investing in education for people throughout adulthood, however it also embodies tensions concerning potential priorities -

broadening participation or the skills agenda? There are clear messages about where the funds to support any expansion in Further Education will come from,

‘Individuals should increasingly accept more control over the development of their own learning throughout life and within their available resources, be ready to invest more in it themselves’ (NAGFCELL, 1997:5)

This, together with changes in the Benefits System and the introduction of fees for Higher Education (2), sends powerful signals about the type of education and training which will receive public funding and consequently the range of educational opportunities which different sections of the community will be able to access.

My study has revealed that whilst there has been an expansion of provision in Further Education, the political steer has had a narrow vocational purpose, despite the rhetoric of ‘choice’, empowerment and concern for communities. Education policies have been presented in terms of ‘opportunities for all’, in which there is a gender blindness. We are given an androcentric perspective which actually privileges a masculine value system and fails to recognise women’s subordinate position in society. Furthermore, the focus on ‘individual choice’ often results in a failure to recognise the diverse experience of women and different and unequal economic and social circumstances within which they live their lives. The new rhetoric of ‘choice and empowerment’ disguises the social structures and historic discourses about women’s roles which have continued to limit their ability to access educational opportunities (3), particularly those which would give them more status and higher salaries. Thus, educational provision is still largely unresponsive to the needs of women, the majority of whom continue to access the ‘traditional’ female curriculum based on caring for others at home and at work (FEFC, 1997a; Rees, 1997). In addition, women are carrying the burden of government under-funding of public services, especially in relation to childcare and the support of elderly and sick relatives. There is little of substance in Labour Government proposals to reform post school education, or to suggest that strategies to redress this situation will be put in place.

POLICY IN PRACTICE

Tensions and contradictions

In this study I have described the impact of the insertion of market principles into the FE sector and in particular the changes that have taken place in colleges since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Government policy continues to require greater cost effectiveness and increased outputs from the sector, as well as a rapid response to a continuous stream of official reports and initiatives: Tomlinson (FEFC, 1996), Dearing (1996), Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (NAGFCELL, 1997). A new Labour Government is keen to progress its own agendas of University for Industry, Individual Learning Accounts, Welfare to Work and Widening Participation whilst maintaining the emphasis on raising achievement.

There are a number of related discourses concerning 'choice', 'efficiency', 'achievement' and 'accountability' evident in the way that Government policy is being interpreted or accommodated through practice (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992; and Whitty, 1998). There are constant tensions and contradictions caused by opposing views of the realities and possibilities of the social function of education: controlling on the one hand and liberating on the other. For example, colleges are required to be accountable to the government for the use of public funds, but they are also required by the government to be accountable to student choice. There is a fundamental tension between the free market and central control - if colleges do not meet student needs, the students will not enrol or stay, but if they do not meet the government targets they will not receive funding. This study has described the different learning outcomes that governments and students seek and highlighted the problems faced by colleges when trying to be accountable to both. Staff are caught at the interface of the two worlds, for example they find themselves simultaneously charged with giving potential students impartial pre-course advice and guidance, whilst also recruiting enough students to meet institutional targets.

Education markets have encouraged colleges to achieve greater efficiency and have promoted competitive 'self-interest'. Colleges have also been required to be responsive to the needs of local communities and to widen participation. The former demand supports the selection of students who can help a college to achieve the maximum number of funding units for the minimum delivery cost; the second requires investment for which there may be a slow return.

As educators, there can be no denial of the importance of extending educational opportunities to all sectors of society, especially those who benefited least from initial education. As managers of an education business, this may be an inefficient use of resources. Managers are thus required to cope with the contradictions which result from both managing education and managing an educational institution.

The government has put pressure on colleges to raise the achievement of a growing number of students, whilst also reducing the per capita funding for doing this. Staff are asked to improve students' examination results, whilst taught course hours are reduced to optimise income through the funding formula. It seems that staff can not win; if student performance does not improve they have failed, if student results do improve then academic rigour is brought into question. The achievements that the women students in my study sought, such as increased confidence and self esteem, more status at work, or within their families, is not formally recognised, although acknowledged by staff. Staff and students thus experience tensions, re-adjusting their actions according to their changing perceptions. It is becoming apparent to some staff that what they had accepted as 'sensible solutions', which would give colleges autonomy and students more choice, have in fact had negative results for both. For example, the creation of college corporations, free of local authority control, was initially welcomed as a way of allowing for creative entrepreneurship and rapid response to social and technological change. It is now clear that incorporation means a firm government steer, increased bureaucracy, increased workload for staff and reduced per-capita funding for students, with any failure to deliver government targets or meet student expectations, blamed on colleges (Michael Bichard, Permanent Secretary DfEE, Raising Quality and Achievement in Colleges, DfEE, AOC, FEFC and FEDA conference, 5th March, 1999). Students and staff are aware that their 'choices' are in fact quite limited.

At the same time, whilst the insertion of market ideology was initially contested by many staff, they have now found ways of working within the changes. Resistance is by subversion rather than confrontation and the stress of this is carried by the individual lecturer. For example, the support from staff, which the women in my study described as crucial to their success, was often provided against the business interests of the college.

The relationship between funding arrangements and outcomes

So far, I have outlined the way in which government, via the FEFC, has used the funding mechanism to force its agenda. Yet this instrument, refined to ensure that public funds are used for vocational purposes, is not flexible enough to allow students to work and build credits over time and penalises colleges (financially and in terms of statistical outputs) if students leave courses early to take up employment - the government objective. Thus, whilst the 'flexible curriculum' has appeared to be the goal for colleges (Robertson, 1994), in reality the funding methods still support a traditional 'full-time' learning model and penalise colleges when students, like the women in my study, interrupt learning, take longer than expected to complete their studies (4), or want to transfer to a different course or institution. We should be concerned that the lack of a national credit accumulation system (5) means that women students who dip in and out of education, because of external factors, are unlikely to gain formal credit for their learning achievements and that the lack of a funding mechanism capable of supporting a national credit accumulation system, means that colleges are unlikely to develop more flexible 'woman friendly' provision.

I have argued that the emphasis now placed on retention and accreditation, because of the funding regime, does little to measure the quality of some of the most important learning that takes place. Outcomes, revealed through my discussions with women students, which included increased confidence and developed inter-personal skills, are valued by employers, (CBI, 1994) but are seldom measured (6). The value added to families and communities is not formally recognised and there is a need for research which extends my study and investigates the non vocational uses to which students put their learning in the years after they leave college, such as contributions to school governing bodies, tenant's associations and voluntary organisations. There is a need for more sophisticated measures of learning and achievement than currently exist (Foster, Howard and Reisenberger, 1998).

The FEFC funding methodology has led to a standardisation of measurement, but also to college practices which optimise funding and distort reality. For example, any student who withdraws between enrolment and the FEFC census date 'does not exist', the college receives no money for pre-entry advice or early attendance, but neither are college achievement or retention statistics affected. In this situation, who is concerned about 'threshold fear', the

reasons for students' early withdrawal from courses and any negative experience an individual may have had?

Colleges' capacity to survive in the market rely on their ability to manipulate situations to their advantage. They need to optimise funding and ensure that performance indicators present them as 'successful'. The linking of student records to funding means that care should be taken in interpreting Individualised Student Record (ISR) statistics published by the FEFC. Not only do I have concerns about the accuracy of this data, but also the uses to which it may be put. There is a need for colleges to carry out more rigorous research if FE is to be able to articulate its case to government and control its future. Researchers have sometimes been too quick to accept an 'obvious' solution and failed to reveal deeper structures. For example, early research in colleges into reasons for withdrawal tended to identify practical reasons which may, or may not, be within the power of colleges to address, such as 'personal' or employment related reasons. My own research has shown that for women students, reasons for under-achievement and withdrawal often have more complex roots related to socially constructed notions of women's roles in society, which frequently mean that they place the needs of others above their own.

Government achievement targets for colleges which have been linked to funding, have meant that women with disabilities and learning difficulties requiring special support or facilities, women requiring crèche, those with poor previous records of attendance and achievement, and refugees, may be identified as 'expensive' and 'high risk' and may not have appeared attractive recruits to some colleges who need to reduce the cost of services and ensure that the maximum number of students achieve their 'primary learning goals' in the minimum time. Yet, these are among the groups who have traditionally been under-represented in education and training. It remains to be seen if the money targeted for the Kennedy agenda (7) is attractive enough to encourage colleges in difficult financial circumstances, to actively recruit these sorts of students.

When government policy has pressed colleges into new relationships with business and industry, who at local level often need low paid workers with basic qualifications, what incentive is there for FE to widen horizons as well as widen participation? The political steer via the funding methodology has been to encourage the expansion of provision which actually limits the choices of many women and directs them into low-paid, low status work such as

catering, hairdressing, or childcare. Whilst the women in my research wanted the same as the government - to be financially independent of the state - they wanted to achieve this through a career and to get themselves out of low-skilled, poorly paid and often demeaning jobs. Their return to education had been motivated by the desire to achieve more status and a higher socio-economic life-style and it is this struggle which is so inadequately supported by the current FE systems.

WOMEN STUDENTS IN THE NEW FURTHER EDUCATION

Women's requirements of education as revealed by this study have implications at both policy and operational levels. This poses a challenge to government and to colleges. There is a need to address structural inequalities and to create flexible learning opportunities in an environment which actively supports women in the achievement of personal and vocational goals so that they can progress and continue to meet challenges throughout their adult lives.

I have argued that there is an unwillingness to acknowledge the social structures which limit educational and employment possibilities for women and maintain their subordinate position, and that this has been supported by a discourse which suggests that opportunities are available to all who wish to access them.. Robertson (1992) has argued that many educational institutions find it difficult to accept research which indicates that they are involved in systematic bias. She suggests that this is because the hegemonic process of male dominance is masked by an apparent gender neutrality which,

‘creates a silence which promotes gender bias while superficially adopting the mannerisms of impartiality’ (Robertson, 1992:58).

Thus, there may well be a reluctance for college managers to engage with some of the issues, revealed by my research, which concern patriarchal relations, women's preferred learning styles and their need for support to help them manage personal change. Perhaps some managers believe that equal opportunities legislation and the number of women students successfully completing FE courses, means that no further action is necessary. It may be that the emphasis on individualised programmes of learning also contributes to a ‘blindness’ and a belief that giving students equal treatment is the same as providing equality of opportunity. The dangers of failing to address the gendered and socially structured issues which women have to deal with in order to return to education and be successful, is that some women, in

particular black and working-class women, may be 'blamed' for their inability to cope with study.

Local access and educational choice

Many of the women I interviewed expressed nervousness about their initial return to education. 'Threshold fear' emerged as a barrier to access and the absence of entry tests and examinations in the early stages, had been important in attracting students, especially from non-traditional groups of learners. Several women had chosen locally provided non accredited courses, often in art, craft, cookery and fitness, as the first step back into education; vocational education was seldom their initial motivation. Becoming adult learners had helped the women develop self confidence, independence and had opened up the possibilities of further study as a way of gaining more control over their own lives. Initial re-entry to education had often been via LEA adult education provision, prior to the 1992 FHE Act. Some women had joined part-time FE courses in the years immediately following incorporation, at a time when there had been less government pressure on colleges (via the FEFC), for students to achieve national qualifications. The lack of publicly funded 'women centred' learning opportunities, which acknowledge what different women want to learn and when and how they want to learn it, often led the women in my study to find ways of using the FE curriculum for their own purposes and according to the patterns of their lives. I have described how this sometimes meant that they left courses early, or did not want to progress immediately to an accredited vocational course. This type of mis-fit between personal learning goals and government defined outcomes, has encouraged a view that public money is being used for leisure purposes. As a result, there has been closer scrutiny of courses provided under Schedule 2 (d) of the Act (8).

The shift in funding for FE from local to central government has made colleges less accountable to local people, yet the high priority given to 'accountability for public funds' has resulted in greater bureaucracy and a substantial additional cost for preparing statistical returns to the FEFC and documentation for inspection. The pressure that colleges have been under to be more efficient, has resulted in some colleges rationalising their provision to achieve economies of scale and reduce infrastructure costs. The reduction of provision at local centres, creates problems for those women who have to fit study around their caring commitments. Pressure on Local Authorities to reduce public spending has resulted in less threshold provision

which is community based, student centred and non accredited. Separation of the different strands of adult learning has had the effect of narrowing choice for many women students with family commitments. It has also weakened progression routes for the very people government say they want to encourage back to study (or perhaps more precisely to work). The 'learning pathways' approach, advocated in the Kennedy report (FEFC, 1997), is a recognition of the need to have local access points, if education and training are to attract under-represented groups.

When people do return to education, the expectation of colleges is that good quality pre-course advice and guidance should enable students to identify the 'right' learning programme. This study has shown that what the women wanted from education often changed over time, as they gained in confidence and began to learn what opportunities there were and how they could access them. The wish to change direction after starting a course is evidence that students have reflected on their experiences and that learning has taken place. O'Rourke, 1995 has correctly identified that,

'When educational disadvantage is compounded by other material differences - of gender, ethnicity, poverty, class, disability and sexuality - the effect is often the denial of imagined possibility' (O'Rourke, 1995:111)

A real commitment to widening participation needs to ensure that people who have gained least from education provision in the past, have their horizons extended, not limited by an early decision. O'Rourke suggests that working-class women in particular, will end up in traditional female jobs, because they do not know what the wider possibilities might be, or do not have the confidence to access them. Whilst there can be no denying the importance of adult focused initial advice, there is also the need to recognise that returning to education is not merely about gaining a qualification or developing vocational skills. It is a transformative experience and as such needs to make a change of direction easy for both student and college.

The FE curriculum and different notions of 'flexibility'

Despite the growth in the number of adult students, the 'new' FE remains un-responsive to the needs of adults, especially women; it is a model which favours the life-style of school leavers. Apart from timetabling some courses to fit around school times, programme planning and delivery generally takes little heed of the patterns of women's lives and the ways in which their

time is frequently circumscribed by the needs of others. This study has revealed the ways in which being part of a family (childhood and adult families) impacts on the lives of women students, which has implications for course design, the choice of teaching and learning methods and the type of learner support which is provided. I have argued that failure to take an holistic approach to the education of women returners will contribute towards their 'under achievement' and the maintenance of inequalities between men and women but also between different groups of women.

Colleges expect students to be able to compartmentalise the different parts of their lives and manage their time. The reduction in lecturer taught time on many courses, requires students to do more work on their own - often at home, yet there is little recognition of the demands this makes on many women students. Programming and strategies to support students who have to miss sessions, often still fail to recognise the demands on women's time outside college. A number of the women in my study felt embarrassed and at fault if they could not structure their lives so that they behaved in a way that was expected of them by the college - to behave as if they had no other life. Some students had dropped out of courses feeling that they were inadequate, rather than that it was the course, or the way it was delivered, that was at fault. Disaffection or guilt had tended to be the response of those students who had fared less well from education in the past - the very students that new government policy seeks to attract to FE.

Colleges have responded to the difficulties some students have with finding time to attend classes, by offering modular courses, flexible open learning and distance learning modes. I have argued that the introduction by colleges of 'Flexible Learning' may appear to be a response to customer demand, yet may be pragmatism in the face of reduced government funding and the need to maintain student numbers whilst cutting delivery costs. Women want provision which is flexible and allows them to fit their education around the changing demands and priorities in their lives; they do not want provision which is fragmented or isolating. The evidence of my research is that the women with children, or resident male partners, find it difficult to find time to study at home and to prioritise time for themselves. Flexible study, as usually defined by colleges, may not address these issues and women's social and learning needs.

I have argued that the regulations governing the funding of FE which focus on the acquisition of qualifications and vocational skills, have made education provision less flexible and less

responsive, by prescribing the outcomes and the time within which they should be achieved. Women want credit for learning, but they also want to learn alongside other people, exploring new ideas and creating knowledge. The external imposition of accreditation, with the intention of raising standards, privileges a competitive, individualistic 'male' view of education and has altered the collective, supportive nature of much provision available to women (Coats, 1994).

Relationships and effective learning

The impact of power relations within childhood and adult families, and beliefs concerning women's 'traditional' role have been revealed as highly influential, often affecting women's ability to access and successfully complete courses. This study has revealed that the early expectations of parents and teachers, often linked to the women's projected future domestic role, had, in a number of instances, limited the early choices they had made about education and training. The continuing presence of 'parental power' had, for some of the women, meant that they had to manage the tension between anger with their parents for their past actions and a need for parental approval in the present. Whilst early experiences in the family and a poor academic record in initial education may require students to cope with feelings about their abilities to learn and achieve in adulthood, past records are not a good predictor of future performance. The women in my study were able to be successful in terms of both institutional outcomes and personal learning goals. They did however need time and support which has financial implications for colleges.

Male partners, even when they did not live with the women, were often found to play a 'gate-keeper' role, influencing the choice of course the women enrolled on. Men did not modify their expectations of the women's domestic role and often sabotaged the women's efforts to study at home or attend college. Family responsibilities not only consumed physical time at home, but also took up women students' psychic time at college. The demands of college and home caused additional mental load and at times, stress. The expectations of them by lecturers and family, resulted in dilemmas and difficult 'choices' - and almost always feelings of guilt.

Teaching and learning strategies and relationships between students and staff therefore need to recognise previous experience and current stresses which may affect achievement. The importance for students in having a member of staff who takes an holistic approach to their

support, emerged as being central to their ability to cope with the demands of returning to education. These 'key tutors' who have often been mature students themselves (9) are role models, mentors and advocates. They are pro-active and demonstrate real interest in their students. They recognise the signs that a student is having problems and they also know the excuses that students make to cover up their anxieties, or external pressures.

Women students often interpreted their interactions with staff on a personal level so that they were 'letting their tutor down' if they did not attend class, or complete assignments on time. This meant that they could give themselves 'permission' to do coursework because it was for someone else and they were servicing another person's requirement, not merely their own 'selfish' interests. It also demonstrates that, to a degree, they were looking for an emotional rather than a contractual relationship with staff. A market approach which supports 'survival of the fittest' (both students and colleges) has resulted in the reduction of taught hours and a commodification of education which runs contrary to the giving of time to develop emotional relationships. The 'key tutors' identified in the study, were often giving students support from their own free time or at the expense of bureaucratic processes. Thus, 'growth' in the FE sector has been at the expense of staff, with fewer people doing more work. New employment contracts have resulted in loss of autonomy, a greater workload and more stress. The emotional need of women students for staff time, runs contrary to the requirement of the market for lower costs and higher productivity.

Relationships were of the greatest importance in terms of successful completion of courses - these included students with their families, students with college staff and students with other students. Having emotional and practical support within and outside college was a crucial factor in terms of helping students reconstruct their lives and empower themselves. It is therefore important that colleges provide social spaces for adult students and that lecturers find strategies which develop group identity so that students have peer support.

WOMEN: MAKING THE FUTURE

Discourses concerning women's role - tensions and dilemmas

Government policy effects education and training opportunities for both men and women. However, boys and men's experience of education has often been taken as the main reference point (Rowbotham, 1973; David, 1980; Spender, 1982, Purvis, 1991; Benn, 1998). It was important to me that this study provided opportunities to focus on and explore women's experience of education and reveal structures and relationships which may not be visible from the dominant patriarchal viewpoint (Harding, 1991). Women are still disadvantaged in education, and employment. For, although the expansion of FE provision has meant that more women are achieving qualifications than ever before (often out-performing men), statistics reveal that irrespective of qualification, from none to degree, men's gross weekly earnings are higher than those of women (CIHE, 1997). This is often because women gravitate towards traditional female areas of study and employment which have lower status and because they have career breaks to care for their children. Cultural 'habitus' also has a significant impact on the life 'choices' that different women make and the feelings they have about those 'choices'.

I have argued that the opportunities made available to women and the 'choices' that women have made, are informed by discourses which have presented women's domestic and generally subordinate roles as 'normal'. Thus educational provision made for women has consistently supported the maintenance of dominant 'patriarchal' interests within society and women have had their economic and social power confined as a result of their limited access to education (Hughes and Kennedy, 1985; Keddie, 1980; Thompson, 1983, 1983a, 1995).

I have also suggested that meanings are constructed according to the experience of the individual and that discursive formations can therefore be contested and reformed; thus the knowledge that women themselves have produced, has been part of emancipatory discourses which challenge patriarchal power and value female difference. This study has revealed how women students resist, challenge and subvert male power. Their return to education can be seen as an act of resistance, a way to bring about a life-change and to empower themselves. The mature students in my research used the educational offer in their own way in order to fit the

patterns of their individual lives and achieve their learning goals. The women emerge as resourceful, generally well organised and determined, actively seeking to make meanings and re-construct their lives (10). An important aspect of their ability to cope with returning to education was to manage their feelings about their caring role within the family and their entitlement to education and self determination.

Publicly funded women's education (which was originally for working-class women) has changed over time, but has consistently confirmed women in their domestic role and trained them to be wives and mothers. When women have been required to participate in the workforce this has tended to be an extension of their domestic skills, predominantly within the traditional discourse of 'caring'. Thus, the women in my study had often had few expectations made of them by parents or teachers beyond motherhood and perhaps employment in childcare, nursing, the hotel, catering, or retail trades - all low paid, low status 'feminised' occupations. They had re-entered education most often via an adult education curriculum of traditional women's subjects. Their attempts to take on more demanding studies and effect a life-change, caused them to construct a personal path through conflicting discourses concerning their rights and responsibilities in relation to others, especially their children. The testimonies of the women clearly show the guilt, anger and stress that this caused them, but also the elation which resulted from making new meanings and opening up new possibilities for the future. The positive effect of feminist epistemology and politics on social discourses concerning parenting, education and employment has enabled some women to have more choice. However, the subjects through which the women in my research chose to effect personal change were often within traditional 'female' curriculum areas. 'Caring' skills traditionally used within the domestic sphere would now be accredited and professionalised - teacher, hairdresser, social worker, counsellor. These students were trapped in the discourse of caring, their 'choices' limited by their gender, yet with some possibility of gaining status and economic independence which their own mothers had not had.

Women are also affected by discourses about morality and their role within the family (Oakley and Mayall, 1996) which touch the fears of our society such as the breakdown of law and order and economic decline. I have identified a persistent, yet changing discourse which places mothers in the domestic sphere, responsible for communicating knowledge and values to their children. A binary opposition of 'we' and 'they' is constructed; the positive aspects of society, decent, hard working and moral is counterpoised with the negative aspects, the lazy, immoral

and permissive. Such discourses enable people to identify a range of 'others' who are the source of problems. Whilst the lone mothers in my study identified groups such as 'single mothers' who were typified as 'lazy scroungers off the state', they were able to separate themselves from the problem.

In this century, women have increasingly been faced by a dilemma between going out to work or staying at home with their families. Either choice opens them up to criticism. The women in my study who were mothers, were trapped between competing discourses. Whilst the rhetoric of 'choice' appeared to offer them a different life from that of the own mothers, with a career, independence, status; the discourses linking youth crime and under achievement with poor parenting pulled them back into the home. Women who choose to be working mothers are constantly haunted by the 'spectre' of a new moral or social crisis which will blame them for their actions. Women who do not become mothers, also have to manage their feelings and the expectations of others in relation to traditional female roles.

Discourses concerning 'good mothering' resulted in dilemmas for some of the women. There was a particular tension between earning money now to give their children a reasonably comfortable life, or living a rather meagre existence in the present in order to secure a better future for the family. Some of the women were similarly torn between caring and emancipatory discourses - should they stay at home and care for their children's emotional and educational needs, or go to college and prioritise their own? 'Choices' were carefully balanced between personal goals for themselves and aspirations for their families. The role model they wanted to provide for their children was that of an independent and successful woman supporting herself and her family. To be a housewife and mother, as their own mothers had been, was not the model that totally satisfied them. Many of the women derived personal satisfaction from their mothering role, yet recognised the lack of status mothers have in British society.

The women in this study carried into adulthood powerful feelings about their abilities to learn and their entitlement to education. Discourses concerning ethnicity, class and gender affected the 'choices' they made. There was a tension for many of the women between personal aspirations and self belief and the feeling that 'education was for other people'. The feeling of being an imposter still surfaced from time to time.

The role of women in making the workforce and learning society of the future.

Whilst government committees have considered ways to create a society committed to lifetime learning, mature women students who are already actively promoting learning in the family and using their skills in their communities, are struggling to cope with the policies and practices which have been put in place since 1992. There has been a narrow employment related agenda with little recognition that 'work' and 'skills', also embrace voluntary work, parenting skills and community participation. Summers (1998) has correctly identified that there is a need for new partnerships between education, industry and local authorities and some fundamental changes in thinking,

'[...] if people are to articulate their aspirations and contribute confidently to planning development and building learning communities' (Summers, 1998:7)

I believe that making returning to education easier for mature women would be a powerful way of creating the government's vision of a 'learning society'. However, I suspect that in the short term, colleges will only take such actions as will assure their own futures.

The challenge to policy makers is to direct the energy and resolve that women students have towards learning, in order to address current economic, social and cultural crises. However, radical changes would need to be made which address patriarchal relations, in order that a female defined education could be developed; one which takes account of the patterns of women's lives and the ways in which their time is circumscribed by others. An education which values what different women want to learn, the way they want to learn it and the outcomes they want from that learning. Education policy needs to take account of the acquisition of cultural capital which benefits their families and communities, outcomes which may not always be measurable via the current college performance indicators. It is not merely the content and delivery of educational provision that is in contention, but also the control of knowledge. Change would require a major shift in gender power relations within the family and the workplace.

How far has government intervention in the FE sector resulted in an increase in the number of people equipped for the casualised workforce of the future? The learning patterns of the women in my study, which were characterised by an involvement with education over a long period within which they added new skills, is precisely the sort of life-long involvement that the

government is promoting, yet this 'intermittent engagement' has not been recognised as a positive model. Future research might investigate to what extent the 'successful' students who had taken a more direct route into qualifications, have acquired a long-term learning habit and contributed to a family learning culture. All the women I was able to contact after leaving the college, were still involved with education or were taking a 'learning break' with the intention of continuing. (See appendix I). Active learning had become part of their identity.

Research is also needed into the employment outcomes of mature women students. How do they fare as newly qualified entrants into professions such as teaching, social work and health, at an age when those who have already had a career, may be considering early retirement? How well do colleges prepare women students for their re-entry into employment and dealing with ageism, as well as sexism, in the workplace?

The vision of a learning society may appear to be driven by egalitarian ideals, or economics, but a growing concern is,

'[...] the gap between those with high skills and those with low skills - or none at all. The uneducated will become disaffected and disenfranchised. Widespread alienation poses a threat to the stability of society' (CVCP, 1996)

To what extent will the skills gap and the possibility of widespread alienation impact on educational opportunities for women? My study has already illustrated the persistence of discourses which link women's role with the maintenance of domestic harmony and the conduct of their children. Some women are already having to manage the results of the frustration that unemployed males members of their families feel, which can erupt as domestic violence. Many women are still trapped in low paid, low status work, with little opportunity for career progression (11). The actual 'choices' women will have available to them will be limited by their material circumstances and the effect of patriarchal relations within the family, the workplace and society in general.

This study has demonstrated that many of the problems that women students have to overcome are linked to poverty - poor housing, the need to rely on public transport, lack of good quality, affordable childcare. This has implications for social, as well as education policies, at local and national government level: welfare benefits, nursery provision, housing, public transport infrastructure. Women are being asked to solve problems caused by underfunding of public services and the creation of environments too dangerous for children to use. Gestures in terms

of low college fees and limited childcare support, fail to recognise the full implications that poverty has for many women students. The problem for these women is that it is they who will be blamed for their inadequate response to the apparent educational opportunities. Unless the new Labour Government links its education policies to other policies and social purposes, it will fail in its own project to make individuals less dependent on the state.

I have described the ways in which women have, since the earliest days of publicly funded education, argued for provision which offers them the opportunity to achieve their potential and gain more control over their lives. Despite the rhetoric of equality of opportunity, it has been clear that women have had to find ways of subverting 'male' defined education for their own purposes. This study has revealed the ways in which mature women students have built alliances with staff, friends and families and worked 'in the gaps'.

The challenge to women students today is to use limited educational opportunities to give themselves more choice, status and a career, when the present system may well be more geared to speedily equipping them with traditional female vocational skills, so that they can get a low paid job and reduce state welfare costs. Many of the women I interviewed had been employed in low paid jobs and were adept at managing 'the double shift' of work and family, on the poverty line. This is precisely what they wanted to change.

Whilst women continue to find employment that fits around their caring responsibilities and industry and government take no active role investing in them as mothers or employees, women will continue to make up for the shortfall from their own financial, physical and emotional resources. The CBI has recognised the skilling of many women in the workforce has been left to the voluntary efforts of individuals,

'Whilst flexibility of employment itself is a welcome trend in a fast changing economy, there is a risk that a significant proportion of the population - women in particular - will find themselves on the periphery of the labour force unless ways and means can be found to enable them to update their skills and competencies (CBI, 1994: 10)

It is important that women continue their fight for equal access to education and training in the workplace, so that they can continue to develop their careers at management level. The casual employment of women in low skill jobs and the growth of the service sector, can be seen as a return to a Victorian division of labour described by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, (1994) as:

'Above stairs a few enjoy a life of increasing luxury, their wealth scarcely taxed and their unearned income growing rapidly. Below stairs there is a ballooning class of the newly

‘flexible’, their income falling in real terms and their opportunities for education and training increasingly diminished’ (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 1994; cited in Uden, 1996:25)

Early indicators of the new government initiatives such as Welfare to Work and Individual Learning Accounts (DfEE, 1998), indicate that women will still have to struggle for public resources to support their education. The phasing out of student grants and the introduction of fees and a loan scheme for Higher Education courses, while superficially appearing to support women returners, may require them to seek the support of husbands or fathers, which as this study has shown may be problematic (12).

Despite the increasing numbers of women in paid employment, there is little indication that roles within the family are changing. The women in my study gained immense satisfaction from mothering, but were angered by the lack of status it gave them and found the isolation and weight of responsibility onerous. It was the stereotype that the position as housewife, mother, or single mother ascribed them, that they wanted to escape. They were investing in their own futures and the futures of their children and grandchildren, mostly with very little practical, moral or financial help from male partners. It is evident that more and more in the future, women will need to decide how they will tackle the absence of men in their learning families. Further research is needed into the role that men take in relation to the promotion and support of learning in the family.

It will be important for women who do succeed, to force the agenda of a female ‘student centred’ learning, which recognises and values women’s experience and concerns and to argue for more recognition for the role women play in promoting a culture of lifelong learning in families and communities.

Women also need to challenge any complacency that may exist in relation to equality of opportunity. For despite all the problems they face, women students consistently out-perform male students (McGivney, 1996) and yet are under-represented in the higher status, higher paid sections of the workforce (13).

CONCLUSION

The 1992 FHE Act has given adult learners access to mainstream funds for the first time and an increasing number of them have been entering Further Education in the past five years. In 1996/97, 77.1% of all students in FE were adult and 55.1% of all students were female (1,703,900,000) (FEFC, 1998). Mature students have benefited from low cost/concessionary fee policies, improved pre-course advice and guidance, the greater range of learning programmes and accreditation that are now available and more rigorous courses which support progression. Adult basic education is now part of mainstream provision and not peripheral, as in the past.. The Children Act, 1989 and FEFC funding for childcare, has resulted in better quality care, although the number of places remains inadequate to meet demand. However, women with children have benefited from opportunities to maintain, or upgrade their skills and gain qualifications, to help them re-enter employment. Concern about quality and student retention has resulted in improvements in learner and learning support, including guidance and counselling. In many ways women have more educational opportunities than ever before. As Coats (1996), writing as chair of NIACE's Women's Education Policy Committee concluded, there is evidence to show that,

‘women’s education and training is still flourishing; that standards are high and, above all, that creativity and innovation are taking place, despite the current constraints and cut-backs.’ (Coats, 1996:1)

However, my study has highlighted the need for educational provision which recognises the motivations of mature women learners and provides structural and material opportunities for empowerment and personal change. Vocational aspiration is not the only motivation, although qualifications do provide a goal, status and credentials which open doors. It is more difficult to discriminate against women when entry depends on something as transparent as qualifications (Rees, 1997)(12). Education for women needs to support the maintenance of psychological health and the achievement of qualifications and personal growth.

This search for self knowledge, authenticity and the potential for agency in bringing about social change, lies at the heart of this study. The importance of individual struggles for identity and self should not be minimised. I have argued that returning to college was partly an act of resistance; the women in my study were struggling to have more independence and choice than their mothers and lay the foundation for their own children’s social mobility, if they had them.

Most of the women were the first member of their family to gain a qualification. This had huge significance for them; education had helped them to effect a life-change (albeit through 'traditional' female areas of study) and had increased not only their own choices, but those of their families. The value of intellectual and cultural capital was recognised. They had gained confidence, marketable skills and the knowledge that education is not just for other people, it is for them. The women had coped with returning to education, frequently as a result of personal determination, supportive family and friends and 'key tutors', rather than because of the provision itself. Indeed their success partly relied on their abilities to subvert, in order to meet their social and educational needs within the state offer. However, a possible outcome of students failing to complete courses, or gain qualifications, is that some of these ways into education may not exist in the future.

Whilst these women were succeeding, often in very difficult personal circumstances, there were others who found it impossible to add education to the other pressures in their lives. This study has used the experience of women students in FE in order to make visible the impact of policy. Unless the issues that I have identified in this study can be addressed, it is unlikely that attempts to attract non-traditional participants to education, will be successful and support the government's vision of a New Learning Age. Those with few qualifications, limited financial resources and low self esteem, will perceive that nothing has altered the structures which maintain their social position, and that what appears to be an open door is in fact a revolving door which places them back in the same place they entered.

Key issues for policy makers and for further research

This thesis has argued that despite an increase in the number of women returning to study in FE, government education and social policy continues to ignore the deeper structures within society which limit the choices available to many women. Policy implementation at college level similarly often fails to recognise what women want from education and the way in which learning opportunities need to respond to the patterns of different women's lives.

My research has revealed how women locate themselves and are located within families and communities which are constituted in a variety of different ways. It has provided new insights into the way in which individual women students act within a social world, which affects their

abilities to access and succeed in education. In particular, it has shown the effect of familial habitus and inter-generational relationships, within the domestic domain, on individual achievement. There is a need for more grounded research which investigates the lived reality of women's lives and explores their common and different experiences and feelings. Further research should explore the different types of flexibility that women need and suggests how these might best be facilitated. This is especially important at a time when a national initiative in Inclusive Learning (14) is being spearheaded by the government through the FEFC and DfEE. In particular, there is a need for further investigation of the role played by differences in material, cultural and social capital in the processes of familial and friendship support. This has important implications for government funding of college support systems and also the money they make directly available to students to support their studies. There is currently insufficient recognition by government agencies of the need for practical and pastoral support for adults, which can help them cope not only with the cost of study, but also deal with their lack of confidence and entitlement to succeed in education, which relates not only to issues of gender but also class and 'race'.

The continuing mixture of state control and market forces, with a high profile standards agenda, places colleges in the limelight in terms of increasing participation and raising achievement and allows the government to distance itself from possible failure. The price of failure by colleges will be high, in a climate of 'blame, name and shame' (TES 5th March, 1999). Thus, it will be important that the effectiveness of the 'widening participation initiative' is monitored and research is undertaken to reveal the success of the different strategies being employed. A key area on which to focus, because of the pressure on colleges to simultaneously raise achievement and provide learning for people who have been least successful in education in the past, is the recruitment and selection of students. This study has already suggested that colleges may have 'hidden' admissions criteria, which result in people from some minority ethnic groups and other social groups finding it easier to enrol on courses than people from less 'desirable' groups.

Differences in material and cultural resources affect confidence and likely outcomes. I believe that the emphasis on education improvement initiatives introduced by the government exaggerate the extent to which individual colleges, or 'college partnerships', can overcome social inequalities. Education is powerful, but it can not transform society on its own. I suggest that there is insufficient recognition of the fact that lack of money, poor mental health,

the stress of re-habilitation after drug or alcohol dependency, all impact on individual students ability to learn; but they also impact on the learning of others in terms of people arriving in class late, attending intermittently or exhibiting challenging behaviour.

The clear message of this study is that raising of educational achievement in Britain can not be achieved through education policy alone. Whitty (1998) has argued for the need to build 'social capital' in communities, pointing out that this, rather than substantial increases in material resources, might be a more powerful way of improving health, education and economic prosperity in disadvantaged areas. This study has suggested the important role that many women play as a result of their own involvement in education, in building social capital in their families and communities. With the Labour Government's stated interest in 'capacity building' in local communities (15), the role that women play in relation to local 'capacity building' is worthy of further study over time. It might also reveal more information about the value added to the lives of individuals and communities by FE.

If progress is to be made in terms which address social exclusion and disadvantage at an individual as well as community level, there must be more inter-agency work and local partnership. However, this will only be successful if it is supported by 'joined-up-thinking' and long-term strategic planning from the government itself and congruence between its social and education policies.

Although this study focused on student experience, the impact of changing conditions of academic work for lecturers in the post-incorporated sector, affected the relationships and learning that took place. An important new revelation in my research is the role that staff play as 'key tutors'. At a time when colleges are being asked to implement Inclusive Learning approaches and introduce new teaching standards for lecturers (16), it is important that grounded research is carried out into the formal and informal time that staff currently spend with students and the ways in which this impacts on their students' satisfaction and achievement and their own sense of professionalism. In particular this study suggests that some lecturers play an important role in mediating 'managerialist' policy in order to meet their own objectives and those of their students.

Many of the recent changes in FE which are described in this study, have been driven through by a 'managerialist' style of management based on business practices (Bowe, Ball and Gold,

1992 and Clarke and Newman, 1997). Research however, seldom considers gender, class or 'race' in relation to management style. The role that women staff played in mediating policy at local level, was revealed as especially important in my study. There are significant numbers of women managers in FE, yet very little research, particularly from a feminist perspective, into their practice. If educational opportunities for women are to improve, then women managers have an important role to play. Some are not only involved in developing local policies and procedures, but through networks and formal structures, are in a position to influence national policy. Do women managers in FE behave differently from their male colleagues? How far is managerialism the dominant discourse and to what extent is it contested? How much capacity do feminist managers have to influence the way in which national policy is developed and interpreted at local level?

Finally, I am a senior manager in an FE college and I have involvements at regional and national level. Throughout the period of this research I have drawn out those issues which I believed to be new and important and have used my findings to inform local and national policy development. The present time offers a real opportunity for positive change, with the focus of the national policy community on Lifelong Learning. My recent experiences of talking to politicians and senior government officials indicate a willingness to be influenced by timely and insightful research findings. Sadly, there is a paucity of good quality research available on the FE sector and significant gaps in the related professional and academic literature. The overall weight of published material does not adequately reflect the importance of the sector in relation to national, social and economic development. Whilst universities have the experience and capacity to undertake independent, scholarly research, I believe that it is important that those who have the insights developed through working in FE are also actively involved in researching their sector. Governments will always select which research findings are useful and timely for policy purposes, so highlighting issues will not necessarily mean that they will be addressed. However, I hope that some of the findings from this study have made some modest contribution to policy formation which will support women in their efforts to use FE to construct a new future for themselves, their families and their communities.

NOTES

1. A government White Paper, based on the findings of the Fryer report (NAGFCELL, 1997) planned for publication in November 1997, was delayed for three months and 'demoted' to a consultative Green Paper (DfEE, 1998).

2. In response to the report by the National Committee of Inquiry on Higher Education (Dearing), the 1997 Labour Party conference backed plans to almost phase out student grants and to introduce tuition fee payments for all but the poorest third of students (with a gross family income below £23,000. a year). (Source DfEE, 1997)
3. The Fryer report (NAGFCELL, 1997) found that some groups of women including lone parents, continue to be under-represented amongst the people in post-school education and are therefore a priority group.
4. College staff may be sympathetic to the needs of students but if a student fails to complete a course within the time allotted to that qualification by the FEFC, then the college will not receive payment for the additional course units. Colleges are thus limited in how patient they can be.
5. A National Framework for Credit which would recognise interim achievement, was advocated by the Kennedy committee (Kennedy, 1997) The government green paper 'The Learning Age' recognises the need for a national credit framework but does not present it as a priority for early realisation.
6. GNVQ additional units recognise skills such as teamwork.
7. The FEFC funding mechanism is being revised to give additional 'weighting' to students recruited from areas of deprivation as indicated by post codes, in order to support 'widening participation' .
8. Schedule 2(d) of the 1992 FHE Act allowed for the public funding of courses that were not themselves accredited but supported progression to accredited courses. Colleges' failure to demonstrate that the majority of students did progress, resulted in tighter controls by the FEFC as to what they would fund. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's initial proposals for the admissions of qualifications to the National Qualifications framework is limited to 'qualifications' and they suggest that the only provision funded through the public purse will be that which leads to qualifications (approved by them). The FHE Act, 1992 makes a distinction between 'approved qualifications' and 'approved courses or provision' both of which may receive FEFC funds. Whilst it is tempting to argue for locally responsive provision which does not have to fit the QCA definitions of qualification, the non-inclusion of courses in a national framework could maintain an education divide which disadvantages women. There is thus a need to argue the notion of what constitutes a qualification so that a flexible and inclusive framework can be developed to support the broad vision of Lifelong Learning.
9. When I have spoken about this at conferences it has always been a point of particular interest. Some managers have told me that they deliberately try to recruit tutors who have been 'women returners' themselves because of the empathy and special relationship which develops. One working class woman, who was a mature student and now runs an Access course herself, emphasised the importance of students having support from someone who has experienced the problems of making a life-change, of dealing with what she called 'the Pygmalion effect'.
10. It is important to remember that the women who actually enrol on substantial part time FE courses are a small percentage of the population and that there are many others who lack the confidence to return to education or do not believe that colleges have anything to offer them. The follow-up conversations that I had with the women in my study (see appendix I), after they had completed their courses, indicates that they had to continue to negotiate obstacles to achieve their goals and consequently there were disappointments and postponements of targets as well as successes.
11. The comparative earnings of men and women reveal that women with the same level of qualifications as men consistently earn less. (source - The Institute of Fiscal Studies, 1994 cited in Uden)

12. Student loans will replace maintenance grants. Repayments will depend on what graduates earn, not how much they borrowed. Those not in employment or on very low wages (below £10,000 p.a.) will pay nothing. Superficially this change would seem to work to the advantage of women like those in my study. However, running up debts, even in the form of a student loan is a difficult choice for women with dependants. The new arrangements may be a particular problem for women who have to ask their husbands for the tuition fees (up to £1,000 a year) as well as for money for books, equipment travel, childcare. Women under 25 who have not been self supporting for three years will have parental income taken into account. (Source DfEE, 1997)
13. Progression within organisations may be more problematic because promotion may depend of less transparent qualities and it is here that the 'glass ceiling' operates.
14. Inclusive learning takes a whole college approach to quality. It is intended to help colleges strengthen and improve students' learning experiences and improve retention and completion rates in the FE sector. It focuses on individual learning styles and the development of systems which match what a student needs from each stage of their involvement with the college with what is provided. On 16th Nov. 1998 I met with a reporting inspector from FEFC to discuss issues for colleges arising out of implementing the widening participation initiative and inclusive learning. On 8th Feb. 1999 I briefed two senior officials from DfEE about support that students from non-traditional groups of learners need, in order to succeed in FE. More grounded research is essential if government policy is to be influenced.
15. I discussed this with Karen Buck MP, member of the Government's select committee on education, 23rd November 1998. As a college manager I have a particular concern that because some students leave before gaining qualifications, the valuable learning that has taken place is not recognised.
16. FENTO initiative, launched by DfEE and FEDA on 25th Jan 1999.

APPENDIX I

WOMEN IN THE STUDY

Pseudonyms are used for all the names of the women who were interviewed as part of my research. The biographies are based on the self descriptions given by the women at the start of each interview with post interview up-dates in italics.

Abimbola

Abimbola is in her forties. She is black British of African parents, middle class. She is married and has six children and a grandchild. She had undertaken a series of adult, further and higher education courses since leaving school. She had worked as a secretary and a youth worker. At the time of the interview she was working in the college as a lecturer in Adult Basic Education and studying on an Open University course in psychology. *Abimbola continues to teach.. One of her children is now a student at the college. Jan. 1998.*

Cleo

Cleo is 31 years old. She is mixed race, working class. When she left school she worked in a shop. She returned to education to study on a pre-Access course when she was made redundant last year. She is a lone parent with one son aged three. At the time of the interview she was studying sociology and psychology (and had dropped anthropology) on an Access to social sciences course and also taking GCSE mathematics. She was unsure of her next step but was considering social work. *Cleo gained her Access certificate after spreading it over two years. She lacked sufficient range of work experience to gain a place on a Diploma in Social work course. She returned to the college and took a counselling course and is planning to re-apply to university now that her son has started school. Jan. 1998.*

Floella

Floella is 43 years old. She is black British of African parents. She left school to work in show business with her family. When she had a child she worked as a telephonist and then as a production assistant for the BBC. She is a lone parent with one son who is twenty and still living at home. She completed a short counselling course last year and at the time of the interview was

studying psychology, sociology and GCSE mathematics on an Access to social sciences course.. She hoped to go to university to read psychology and become a counsellor. *Floella gained her Access certificate with merit and gained a place at university to read psychology. She is finding the work difficult but has plenty of friends encouraging her. She is halfway through her course. Jan. 1998.*

Geraldine

Geraldine is 34 years old. She was born in Armagh, Northern Ireland in a white, working class family. She left school at fifteen to work in a factory. She joined the circus and travelled with them for fourteen years. She is a single parent with a son aged four, she has a current partner. Last year she left a course in a private hairdressing college to study hairdressing part time in a further education college. At the time of the interview she was in the first year of a City and Guilds hairdressing course. She planned to become a self employed hairdresser and reflexologist. *Geraldine completed her course and gained the full NVQ hairdressing award. She progressed to another college to study for an NVQ level 3. Oct. 1997.*

Lizzie

Lizzie is 40 years old. She was brought up in a large middle class family in Jersey. She is white. She came to London when she was sixteen to train as a nurse. She left before completing her training and had a number of part time jobs. She had four daughters with her first partner and two sons with her second. She is divorced and supporting her children on her own. She failed to complete a teacher training course when her children were young and since then has attended a number of art courses in adult and further education and gained a City and Guilds qualification in ceramics. At the time of the interview she was enrolled on a business course for crafts people. *Lecturers lost touch with Lizzie who had been at the college for a number of years. She had hoped to get a council house exchange and move out of London.*

Lorna

Lorna is 23 years old. White, Scottish, working class. She left school at sixteen with no formal qualifications, running away from home with an older man. She became involved with drugs and had a nervous breakdown. She had been employed in a number of different jobs but had not settled to anything for any length of time. She is unmarried with no dependants. At the time of the interview her boyfriend was living with her. She was on an Access course studying English,

Afro/Caribbean studies and anthropology and was not sure of the next step. *Lorna split up with her boyfriend before the end of the course. She gained a place at the same university as Petra to study English and Caribbean History. She coped well with the academic work but felt isolated at university with large lecture groups and difficulty contacting tutors, in contrast with the support from staff and students on her college Access course. She was considering leaving when I met her at the end of her first year at university in Sept. 1997. In September 1998 she had taken a 'learning break' from university and had returned to the college to work in reception, January 1999.*

Marilyn

Marilyn is 26 years old. She is black British of West Indian parents. She left school at sixteen and did not complete her studies at Sixth Form College. She has had a number of jobs e.g. MacDonalds, Argos and at the time of the interview was attending college 12 hrs per week and working as a doctor's receptionist in the evenings. She is a lone parent with one son aged five. She was on a Business Studies NVQ course and planned to progress to university. *Marilyn successfully completed her course and gained her qualification and progressed to university to study accounts and finance. She had a difficult first term because of family illness. She found a new part time job with a higher salary which fitted better around her course and was feeling confident when I spoke to her Jan. 1998..*

Michelle

Michelle is 21 years old and was born in London. She is white, working class. She left school at 16 with no qualifications and worked in catering. She has one 3 year old daughter who she is bringing up alone, having separated from her partner after returning to education. She has attended a number of different further education courses over the past few years and was studying on an Access to humanities course at the time of my interview. She hoped to go to university and become a journalist. *Michelle gained a place at university to study sociology and communications. She re-married. She coped fairly well with the academic work in the first year but her family became increasingly unsupportive especially when they discovered that she did not get paid for her work placement. When I spoke to her before the start of the second year at university she was considering giving up, Oct. 1997. She re-married. In January 1999 she contacted her 'key tutor' at the college for a reference. Michelle and her daughter were living in Yorkshire, she had dropped out of university and was 'on the run' from her violent*

husband (after he broke her nose). In June 1999 Michelle told her ex-key tutor that she had decided to return to university.

Morag

Morag is 29 years old. She was born in Edinburgh and is white working class. She came to London at the age of seventeen to study nursery nursing. She has had a number of jobs including working as a housekeeper in a hotel and as a childminder. She is divorced and has a son aged eleven. She has undertaken a number of part time courses over the past few years including an Access course last year which she decided not to complete. At the time of the interview she had just completed a BTEC 'First Steps in Childcare course' (12 weeks) and had started the two year BTEC diploma course in childcare. She hoped in the future to work with children with special needs. *Morag returned to undertake the second year of her course but dropped out in the last term thereby gaining a number of units but not the diploma. Finance was a problem and she had a number of other interests. She returned to the college to study British Sign Language. Oct. 1997.*

Nadine

Nadine is 23 years old. She is black British of West Indian parents and describes herself as classless. She has a partner and two sons aged six and two years. She was attending college sixteen hours a week and studying business and management. She also did domestic work one day a week (cash in hand). She planned to progress to university. *Nadine had some literacy problems but successfully completed her course and gained her qualification at college. She progressed to a degree course in business studies. She was finding the reading hard work but was in good spirits when I spoke to her. Jan. 1998.*

Nicola

Nicola is 24 years old. She is white, middle class. Her parents travelling resulted in her attending fifteen different schools and continued on to college, leaving with one A level. She has since travelled and had a number of jobs. She is single and has no children. She returned to education last year to study business administration and computing. At the time of the interview she was on an acting Access course and taking A level theatre studies. Her aspiration was to set up her own theatre company and write. *Nicola failed to get into Higher Education at the end of the course and returned to the FE college for further studies. She progressed to HE in Sept. 1997 to study for a BA in Drama. Oct. 1997.*

Petra

Petra is 40 years old. She was brought up in a Yorkshire Mining village. She is white working class. She left school to come to London and study nursery nursing. She is married to a Moroccan man and has three children in their early teens. She had undertaken a series of different adult and further education courses over a fourteen year period. At the time of the interview she was studying Afro-Caribbean studies, history and English on an Access course. She planned to go to university to read English and to become a teacher. *Petra achieved her access award with distinction.. She gained a place at the same university as Lorna (they were great friends and I had interviewed them together) to study B.Ed, Primary, specialising in Design and IT. Her tutor met her in Sainsbury's at 10.30 p.m.- she is working there two evenings and Saturdays as well as looking after her family, studying and doing teaching practice. (Oct. 1997). She was very positive about her course and said that she had learnt to let the housework go! She is now in the second year of her course. Jan. 1998.*

Trish

Trish is 30 years old. She was born in Lancashire and describes herself as white working class. She is a single parent with a daughter aged three. She left school at sixteen and went to college to study business administration. Since then she has undertaken a foundation course in art and design but failed to get a place on a degree course. At the time of the interview she was in the second year of a BTEC art and design course and making applications to study for a degree in fine art. *Trish failed to get into her first choice Art Colleges to study fine art. She accepted a place on a community arts degree course.*

Zandra

Zandra was born in Haiti in the West Indies. She is thirty nine. She is a qualified architect (MA) and practised for five years before marriage and children. She is married and has moved house (and country) four times in the last six years. She has two children aged eleven and nine. She has undertaken a number of courses in the past few years including a course on conservation for unemployed architects (Switzerland) and some adult education courses in writing and illustrating children's books and assertiveness for women. At the time of the interview she was on an Open College Network validated fashion course. She was not sure of her next career move. *Zandra completed her FE course and applied to study Fashion Management at a specialist college. Zandra failed to get a place on the course because she had no experience in the trade. Her*

husband became unemployed. She was working part time as an administrator for a firm of architects and a firm of surveyors and was re-assessing her position, Jan. 1998. In 1998 Zandra was considering returning to college to study tailoring.

APPENDIX II

SURVEY OF MATURE STUDENTS IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Summary of main findings

Sample (149 replies) *All percentages are based on total returned

Age

16 - 25		26 - 35		36 - 50		51 - 60		60+	
39	*26%	55	37%	35	23%	10	7%	10	7%

Gender

	Female		Male		unknown		totals	
Full time	38		9					
Part time	71		24					
Totals	109	73%	33	22%	7	5%	149	

Students who stated that they had previously left a course before the end

	Female		Male		Totals of all replies	
Full time	11		4		15	10%
Part time	19		3		22	15%
Totals	30	20%	7	5%	37	25%*

More students gave reasons for non completion than admitted to 'dropping out' see below

Reasons given for non-completion of previous course of study	Female F/T	Female P/T	Male F/T	Male P/T
Financial problems	II	II		
Disability	I			
Health	I	III		
Work commitments/pressures		II		II
Lack of time	I	II		
Transferred course	I	I		
Took on too many courses	II			
Wrong choice of course	I	III		
'Teacher made me feel inadequate'	I	I		
Poor teaching (boring)		I	I	
Made poor progress		II		I
Lack of personal motivation			II	
Sexual harassment		I		
Moved away		I		

Students who had considered leaving current course before the end

Full time	8	5%
Part time	13	9%
Total	21	14%

Factors which motivated students to continue (open-ended question, not tick boxes)

	Female F/T	Female P/T	Male F/T	Male P/T	Totals
Gaining a certificate	II	IIII	I		8
Progression to HE/getting a degree	III	II		I	6
Career/employment		II			2
Enjoyment of subject	III	II	II	I	8
To learn/develop a skill	II	IIII			7
Enjoyment of the learning process	III				3
Encouragement of staff	IIII	III	I		8
The group learning experience	II	I			3
Not to let down staff/fellow students		I			1
Learning/making progress		II	II		4
Access to specialist facilities	I		I		2
To provide better future for my children	I				1
Determination to succeed		IIII		I	6

Selection of comments from students about the problems of returning to study

“Juggling personal life and study, also the cost of materials” (Female F/T)

“College hours and lecturers need to be sympathetic to single mums trying to get children to and from school, while being committed to their courses”

“The planning of time. Management of time is a problem, speaking as a single parent. Help with organisation would be good” (Female F/T)

“More money available - travel grants” (Female F/T)

“Government unemployment restrictions make such a course difficult to fund and attend” (Female F/T)

“Time and money, there’s never enough of either. Work and your studying suffers, or go on the dole and suffer” (Male F/T)

“Finding time to study is difficult if you have a family. Returning to study after long breaks is often difficult” (Female P/T)

“It is very difficult to cope with bringing up children on one’s own and academic work, especially all the assignments we are required to do.” (Female P/T)

“Finance - constant battles with social security regarding whether or not I am available for work. I feel forced to lie” (Female P/T)

“It is not possible always to attend class” (Female P/T)

“As a mature student you may feel intimidated in classes dominated by younger more academic people. You may not ask what help you can get” (Male P/T).

APPENDIX III

ACRONYMS

ABE	Adult Basic Education
ACACE	Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education
AEI	Adult Education Institute
ALF	Average Level of Funding (FEFC)
ALS	Additional Learning Support (funding category, FEFC)
AOC	Association of Colleges (formed from AfC and CEF in 1996)
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council (Edexcel from 1997)
BSA	Basic Skills Agency (formerly ALBSU)
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer (system for gaining credits towards qualification, mainly HE)
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CEF	Colleges Employers' Forum
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals
DES	Department for Education and Science
DFE	Department for Education (replaced DES)
DFEE	Department for Education and Employment (replaced DFE in 1995)
DLE	Demand Led Element (FEFC funding)
DSS	Department of Social Security
EDEXCEL	Incorporates BTEC and London Examinations
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
ERA	Education Reform Act(s)
ESF	European Social Fund
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency (inaugurated 1995)
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council (inaugurated after 1992 FHE Act)
FENTO	Further Education National Training Organisation (launched 1999)
FEU	Further Education Unit (subsumed within FEDA)
FHE	Further and Higher Education
FOL	Flexible Open Learning
FTE	Full time Equivalents (number of part-time staff/students measured as full-time)
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate

IIP	Investors in People (national quality standard for training and staff development)
IFS	Institute of Fiscal Studies
ISR	Individualised Student Record (statistics required by the FEFC which are part of the funding mechanism)
LEA	Local Education Authority
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NAGFCELL	National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (Fryer)
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NIAE	National Institute of Adult Education (became NIACE)
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NNEB	Nursery Nursing Examination Board
NTETs	National Targets in Education and Training (set by DfEE)
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OCN	Open College Networks (national credit awarding bodies e.g. Access courses)
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PPA	pre-school Playgroup Association
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RSA	Royal Society of Arts (examination board)
SCAA	School Curriculum Assessment Authority
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SOED	Scottish Education Department
TEC	Training Enterprise Council (Government funded)
TOPs	Training Opportunities (Government funded courses for adults)
TQM	Total Quality Management
UCAS	University Central Admissions Service
VFM	Value For Money
WOW	Wider Opportunities for Women courses
WRFE	Work Related Further Education
YOP	Youth Opportunity Scheme
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

APPENDIX IV

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Adult Education is a generic term used by Kelly (1992) in his seminal *History of Adult Education* and embraces mediaeval religious teaching, the beginnings and development of secular adult education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the coffee-houses, clubs and societies of the eighteenth century and perhaps most importantly the great driving forces of middle-class reform and working-class radicalism which resulted in educational expansion in the nineteenth century. Kelly's definition of adult education includes the voluntary sector and publicly funded adult, further and higher education. Fieldhouse (1996) takes an equally broad view in *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, using the term 'adult education'

'to apply loosely to education for adults beyond initial, normally full-time and (more recently) compulsory education after the end of 'childhood'. And it is a term which embraces the many modern variations - community education, continuing education, lifelong learning, and so on' (Fieldhouse et al, 1996: Preface vii).

The term **Adult Continuing Education** has been used to embrace all post compulsory non-vocational education but is most often used in relation to the part time liberal non-accredited programmes of Universities. However Benn, Elliott and Whaley (1998) have argued that this definition has become problematic as continuing education departments now offer an increasing number of accredited programmes which lead to named awards, whilst colleges and mainstream university departments are offering more flexible modular programmes. This means that the possibilities of students 'picking and mixing' modules from continuing education and mainstream provision is increasing. For these writers and others, the key issue is maintaining the best traditions of continuing education to ensure that they meet the needs of disadvantaged groups and ensure,

'that the work of adult continuing education is somehow part of a wider process of social, economic and political change' (Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998:4).

'Adult' and 'Continuing Education' thus carry with them a powerful history and for many in the field, they are not merely terms to describe learning opportunities for adults, or identify the sector or sources by which they are funded, but embody the values of a political movement (it is

no accident that Alan Tuckett, Director of NIACE referred to 'this great movement of ours' in his response to the Conservative Government consultation document *Lifetime Learning* (TES, 8.12.95).

In the first chapter which deals with the historical background of educational provision for women, I have followed the established convention of using 'Adult Education' as a generic term to include all post school education. In the study itself, I use adult education in a narrower sense to describe the provision made by Local Authorities under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. This more restricted use is intended to reveal the effect of education policy as 'grassroots' level. However Local Authority educational provision for adults is variously described at local level e.g. Hammersmith and Fulham Community Learning and Leisure Services, Westminster Adult Education Service. The term Community Education is sometimes used where the service combines adult education and the youth service, but it is also used to express values - that adult learning is not purely about an individual gaining knowledge, it is also about group learning, collective action and the benefit to whole communities, be they 'geographical communities' or communities of interest such as a Muslim women's group. Local Authorities may also contract with FE colleges for the delivery of adult education to local residents as in the case study college.

Adult Learning is the more usual generic term now used to describe the range of formal and informal learning opportunities available to adults in local authority, further and higher education and the voluntary sector. (*Adults Learning* is the title of NIACE'S magazine).

Lifetime Learning was the phrase used by the Conservative Government to describe their vision of adult learning (DfEE, 1995). I use this phrase only in this context.

Lifelong Learning is a concept which embraces the notion of people learning continuously throughout their adult lives. It has been adopted by the Labour Government and its meaning attached to Labour's vision of adult learning. There are different and changing meanings attached to the notion of Lifelong Learning. In this study I use the phrase in terms of the values expressed by Fryer (NAGCELL, 1997) Kennedy (1997) and the Labour Government (DfEE, 1998), although it should be recognised that there is not necessarily consensus between those authors and certainly not between the policy makers and implimenters.

Further Education as a term can be traced back to the 1944 Education Act and the establishment of a Further Education Schemes Committee by the Labour Government in April 1946. LEAs were expected to offer post-compulsory education which was,

‘a synthesis between the utilitarian and the cultural so that a wide choice of educational opportunities may be brought within the range of the imagination of all’ (Ministry of Education, 1947:76)

Although legally ‘Further’ education embraced all post-compulsory education except HE, a split evolved so that FE colleges provided vocational education for school leavers and evening institutes provided an increasingly non-vocational, part time education for adults, which focused on ‘recreational’ and community interests (Fieldhouse, 1996). What I describe as the ‘old’ **Further Education** was provision organised by Local Education Authorities after the 1944 Education Act and prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (HMSO, 1992). The ‘new’ **Further Education**, is generally referred to in this study as FE and describes the provision made under the Act by incorporated colleges post March 1993 and which is funded by the Government via the Further Education Funding Councils.

The problems of definitions in relation to different types of adult learning has become even more complex in recent years as education providers scramble for their share of the adult market and government funding. Local authority and community providers have sought FEFC funding for their accredited programmes and ‘unit hungry’ FE colleges have been keen to franchise provision out.

In all this however, it is important to note that, with the exception of ‘university’ which had a particular status for the women in my study, students are not especially concerned whether the course they are interested in carries the label of ‘adult’, ‘further’ or ‘community education’, they may even give it their own label such as ‘evening class’, or just ‘college’. Thus many of the women in my study had at different times attended courses funded by LEA, FEFC or charitable trusts. Whilst adult students define their own purposes for the education they access, it is education professionals and legislators who attempt to control what education and training is paid for in the public sector and are concerned about the symbolism of the language used to describe it.

I have been an adult educator for twenty four years. I can not separate my history from the history of adult learning. My choice of terms and the meanings I attach to them can never merely describe the organisation of education services for adults.

APPENDIX V

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